

HEROINS AND OTHERS

BY
JOHN
THOMAS

WITH
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Heroines and Others

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Third Edition.

Heroines and Others

BY

ST JOHN LUCAS

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MISS AMELIA

MISS AMELIA.

I.

FOR the Londoner, a walk across his own city from any one point to any other is a cheap and easy method of adventure. Late in the afternoon of a Saturday in October which I had spent in the vain endeavour to obtain a sight of some rare birds reported as visitors to Hampstead Heath, I decided to return in a straight line from that too-populous Paradise to the Temple. Gospel Oak and Kentish Town were merely romantic names to me, and of Camden Town itself, famous in art and song, I possessed only a dim and gloomy idea which I owed to the works of Mr Walter Sickert.

I had not gone far before I began to share all the sensations of the unfortunate poet

who looked on smoky dwarf houses and felt his soul oppressed by a vague dejection. Gospel Oak, instead of being a vast and heaven-pointing tree, was a labyrinth of ugly streets in which I lost myself until I came to the tram-lines, and there were no orchards in Kentish Town. Instead, there were grimy tenements with a great quantity of dis-honourable underclothing hanging from their balconies ; a rabble of infants, mostly anæmic, and all dirty, and a large percentage of persons with "faces whose like one is not glad to find." More depressing, even, than the squat houses and the gaunt tenements were the rows of frowsy villas, with untidy creepers hanging in dank festoons from their peeling stucco, and sombre little gardens in which grimy laurels and mouldering statues drooped in mournful decadence — pathetic remnants of a decayed gentility, they seemed to have given up in despair the struggle to be respectable, and to be wearily waiting for the advent of the housebreaker who would eliminate them from a scene where their presence was no longer decent. Many of them were to let, and I was able to observe, on the boards which announced this fact, various examples of the unfailing optimism

of the house agent. This one was commodious, that one desirable; another, distinguished from its fellows by a tottering trellised balcony on the ground floor, was elegant; yet another, a sinister abode fit only for owls and troglodytes, was actually delightful. None of the villas which were inhabited betrayed any symptom of a sense of life's amenities on the part of its occupants,—unless the presence of abandoned straw hats, outworn boots, and empty sardine tins could be regarded as evidence of a certain luxury. Occasionally the inhabitants of these drab houses regarded me from their windows, and though I felt sorry for them, their aspect was sinister and I loved them not. They seemed all to be women; I saw no vestige of the other sex.

I pursued my way, wondering vaguely why England should have been especially cursed, both materially and spiritually, by this plague of the genteel gone to rot and ruin, and attributing the curse, as I like to attribute most things evil in our social system, to the deadly early-Victorian passion for class distinction and worship of a respectability that was for the most part sham, showiness, and score-off-my-neighbour-ness. In the midst of

these highly original reflections, and whilst I was passing yet another row of villa residences, I was confronted with a singular spectacle.

The street was deserted, except for a group of errand-boys and children who were congregated round a figure that seemed to be clinging to the rusty railings in front of one of the houses. As I approached, the figure resolved itself into an old woman who was dressed in black, and wore a small bonnet which would have been fashionable, I suppose, in the epoch of the crinoline. She had dropped her umbrella, and was clutching the railings with both hands; apparently she was trying to drag herself along, but her feet refused to move. The cluster of children watched her with apathetic interest; the errand-boys were grinning and making remarks in their own horrible dialect.

I pushed my way through the little crowd, and saw that though she was bent, she was a very tall woman, and, to judge by the lines on her face, extremely old. Her eyes were closed, and she was terribly pale. When I asked her if she was ill she did not seem to hear me. One of the errand-boys, however, responded for her.

"Garn, gavner!" he said cheerfully, "she ynt ill. She's bawmy, that's wot she is. Orterbe run in by the pleece."

I ignored this youthful moralist, and spoke again to the old woman. She suddenly opened her eyes, which were astonishingly brilliant, and looked at me.

"I'm afraid I fainted," she said, in a very low voice but quite coherently. "It's nothing —results of influenza. If you would be so kind as to give me your arm—I live at number eighty-two—this road. Very sorry to be a nuisance."

Even the effort of uttering these few words was too much for her. She closed her eyes again, released her grasp of the railings, and would have fallen if I had not caught her. I put my arm round her waist—an action which gave huge delight to the errand-boys—and then questioned the children as to the whereabouts of number eighty-two. They stared at me in solemn silence, but at length a little girl who wore painfully obvious pink flannel underclothing withdrew her thumb from her mouth and held it, pointing backwards, over her shoulder. I scowled like a thunder-cloud at the errand-boys, and began to propel the old woman forward in the

direction indicated. She could only just manage to walk, and our progress was very slow and had possibly a comical aspect; the errand-boys, at any rate, agreed to appreciate the humour of the situation.

The old lady seemed to become feebler with each step that we took; I began to despair of arriving at number eighty-two, and had almost decided to take her into the next house that we reached, when a welcome ally appeared on the scene. A quiet-eyed, decently-dressed woman of about fifty suddenly confronted us, and without wasting time in speech, placed the old lady's right arm round her neck and supported her with a method far more practical than my own. This reinforcement entirely altered the position of affairs; we proceeded steadily down the street, and in a few minutes had reached the gate of number eighty-two. I helped to carry the old lady up the steps, and when she was safely at the front door I asked the woman if there was any one in the house who would look after her.

"She is my mistress, sir," said the woman, producing a latchkey. "She often has these fainting fits. She oughtn't to go anywhere by herself, but sometimes when I'm upstairs

she slips out. If you'll just help me with her into her room, she'll be all right in a minute."

We passed into a dingy little hall: the floor was covered with frayed linoleum, and the paper on the walls was dark with age, but it was spotlessly clean, and there were some good artists' proofs of various Academic pictures. Whilst the maid was shutting the door and I was supporting the old lady, I noticed a number of tweed caps and hats, several fishing-rods and a cricket-bat, on a rack fixed to the wall; evidently there were young people in the house, and it was not, as I had imagined for no particular reason, the abode of a desolate spinster. The maid opened a door on the right of the hall.

"This is her room, sir," she said. "We'll bring her right in and put her on the sofa."

As we lifted the old lady on to that piece of furniture I noticed how terribly emaciated she was; I seemed to be holding a skeleton in female apparel. The maid went to a cupboard, returning in a moment with some brandy in a wine-glass, which she poured into the old lady's mouth. Its effect was immediate; the old lady made a very wry

face and opened her eyes. She stared for a few seconds at the ceiling, then she suddenly sat bolt upright. Her eyes were extraordinarily vivid, and her lips took a comical twist.

“Jane,” she cried, “what were you doing out of doors at this time of day?”

The woman watched her intently. “What were you doing there, Miss Amelia?” she said, speaking, however, very quietly and respectfully. The old lady looked guilty.

“I only went to meet Master Dick on his way from the station,” she explained. “And then I had another of those tiresome fainting fits. I’m growing like those silly girls in that book you read to me—Miss Ferrier’s, wasn’t it?” Her eyes wandered to me. “Mercy! I forgot!” she cried, almost briskly; “that young gentleman gave me his arm and I never thanked him! I’m very much obliged to you, Mr Stranger, I’m sure. If my nephew had found me fainting in the road I don’t know what he would have said. He’s always telling me not to go about by myself. He’ll be here in a moment; you’ll stay to see him—he’ll want to thank you, and you’ll have some tea. Jane, tea! and the Spode cups.”

I looked at Jane; Jane looked at me, and made an almost imperceptible movement of warning. I liked Jane's aspect: she had an old-fashioned air of dogged faithfulness that was not too common amongst her tribe, and I took the hint at once. I thanked the old lady, and said I was certain that she ought to rest after her adventure. I added that I would call to inquire how she was on the following day. She smiled and nodded. "I shall be delighted,—that's charming of you," she said. "But I believe you're running away now because you're afraid of Jane. Jane's a dragon—aren't you, Jane?"

Jane smiled discreetly. "You know you ought to rest, Miss Amelia!" she said. Miss Amelia heaved a comic sigh.

"Well, well!" she murmured, leaning back on her cushions. Then she turned again towards me. "Do come to-morrow, if you care to, but I can't promise—" she broke off abruptly. "You don't live in this awful place?" she cried after a moment.

I explained that I lived in the Temple. "The Temple!" she said. "I knew it forty, no, fifty years ago, when my brother was a young barrister,—hardly a barrister; not full fledged. He became a big-wig after-

wards; I expect you have heard of him, though he's been dead these many years. Dick's father was his son. Lord Arlesfont was his name—he was only a law lord, of course, and invented it himself. How we used to laugh at him about it!"

I had heard much of the late Lord Arlesfont, and, in particular, that he had died worth several hundred thousand pounds. It occurred to me as odd that his sister should be living in an undesirable villa residence near Kentish Town. I glanced round the room: the furniture was old and for the most part ugly, but there were some good pieces of oak, many books, and a number of framed photographs which were mainly portraits of army officers in uniform and young women in bridal or presentation dresses. All these things were superfluous evidence of a fact which I had already realised,—that the old woman had nothing whatever in common with those of her neighbours whom I had seen as I wandered through the drab streets. Though she was wizened and bony, she had a tremendous distinction, she was—as one felt that the male originals of the photographs would have forcibly asserted—every inch a lady,

with a breezy and vigorous personality which age and illness had been unable to tame. There was breeding in every line of her: in her broad brow, her queer long nose, her mouth with its deeply furrowed corners, and the way in which she wore her shabby old black silk dress.

"You're looking at my photographs," she said. "Plenty of soldiers, aren't there? We're a fighting family; one of us has been in every big battle since Ramillies to a certainty, and probably since Crecy or Agincourt. I'm proud of it; I'd have been a soldier myself if I'd been a man. Dick laughs at me when I boast about them all, but there's no doubt it's in our blood. Jane will tell you that I'm quite silly about them; when I was stronger I used to walk to Whitehall just to look at those fine big fellows standing sentry on their black horses; but I can't manage the journey now, and there are no soldiers here—only the Salvation Army, poor things!"

"Do you like living here?" I asked. The old lady laughed, but not bitterly.

"I abominate the place," she said emphatically; "but there are several good reasons why I live here. One of them is that Dick would be miserable in the country, and likes

an out-of-the-way part of London where he won't meet——" She checked herself suddenly; the aspect of her face changed. "I'm a garrulous old woman; I'm not going to weary you with my affairs," she concluded after a moment, and set her lips resolutely.

I went over to her and pressed her bony fingers. "Then I may call to-morrow?" I asked.

She nodded briskly. "That's very gallant of you," she said. "I wouldn't let you come all this way just to see a worn-out old woman, but I really believe that when I tell Dick all about you he'll want to thank you and talk to you. I can't promise, of course; he's very shy, poor boy." She thanked me herself once again, in graceful phrases, for helping her in the street, and waved a hand to me as I went out of the room. "I shall call you my *preux chevalier!*" she cried.

The faithful Jane came to open the front door for me. She, too, thanked me quietly and without any effusiveness. I took my hat from the rack, and as I did so I saw the fishing-rods and the cricket-bat.

"I see that Mr Dick is fond of sport," I said.

"Yes, sir," answered Jane. There was a

queer note in her voice that made me look swiftly at her, and then I realised that she was regarding me with the keenest scrutiny that my very mild personality had ever undergone. Next moment she turned and opened the door. I wished her good evening, and walked down the steps, wondering if she regarded me as a possible burglar. Yet there was no suspicion, I thought, in her eyes; nothing but an intense desire to read my secret soul. I concluded, as I walked away down avenues of gas lamps, that Jane was merely a keen student of human character; but it was a long time before I forgot her expression.

II.

There was no trace of it, however, in her broad, honest face when I went to call on the Sunday afternoon. She seemed really pleased to see me. But when I made inquiries about Miss Amelia's health her smile faded, and she admitted that she was anxious. The old lady had fainted again several times, and her usually strong recuperative energy seemed to have deserted her. I expressed a

fear that my visit would tire Miss Amelia, but Jane alleged that it would have a beneficent effect if I did not stay too long.

"You mustn't mind if some of the things she says seem a bit queer, sir," she added. I thought privately that Jane tended to underrate the mental faculties of her mistress. There had been nothing "queer" about Miss Amelia on the previous day; for an old woman who had just recovered from an attack of faintness her mental clarity had been distinctly remarkable. I said something of the kind to Jane, who made no reply, but opened the door of Miss Amelia's room and announced me.

Miss Amelia was lying on the sofa, she looked amazingly gaunt and white, and her eyes shone with unnatural brilliance. As soon as she saw me she smiled and held out her hand.

"This is very kind of you, Mr *preux chevalier*," she said. "I revise my theories on the manners of modern young men. But, oh dear!" she continued with a comical grimace, "some young men certainly aren't like you, and, after all, I've lured you here for nothing."

"What do you mean by for nothing?" I

demanded when I had shaken her hand and found a chair. She laughed rather ruefully.

"I mean that what I was afraid of has happened," she explained. "That naughty boy Dick is too shy to meet you and has gone off for a long walk all by himself. It's really too bad of him, and I shall give him a good scolding when he comes back. As I said to him, it isn't as if you were one of his relations."

I expressed a polite regret that I had frightened the elusive nephew away. "Doesn't Mr Dick like his relations?" I asked.

The old lady pursed up her lips and looked mysterious.

"He has very good reasons for not liking them," she said. "But I know that he would like you, and he ought to have a man friend. It's very lonely for him here."

"What does he do?" I asked. "I mean, has he a profession?" Miss Amelia shook her head.

"He's not doing anything just at present," she answered. "Of course, he'll find something soon. Then he'll be happier. Poor Dick! he used to be such a happy boy, always laughing and making absurd jokes.

And he was just the same, I believe, in his regiment."

"He was in the Army?" I inquired.

"Yes, in the Thirty-fourth," she replied. "But he left it last year,—wasn't it last year? Time runs on, time runs on so fast." She became silent abruptly and the light in her eyes faded.

"What a pity!" I said after a while. She turned her head swiftly. "Eh?" she cried.

"A pity that he left the Service," I explained. "He is very young, isn't he? And from what you said about him I imagine that he liked soldiering."

She nodded slowly.

"He's only twenty-four," she answered. "Oh! he loved the life! And he was getting on so well; he was so smart and popular. The Colonel admitted that." Her eyes brightened; she looked at me with something of the kind of scrutiny to which Jane had subjected me on the previous afternoon. "I feel certain you're a sympathetic person!" she said, smiling very queerly. Then her expression changed; she frowned, and looked as if she were troubled by some baffling train of thought. "If I told him that you knew

everything and sympathised," she said after a pause, "he would like you."

I made the not very subtle deduction that the military career of the elusive Dick had ended painfully or scandalously. "Wouldn't it be better to wait before you tell me anything intimate about him?" I suggested. "I'm only a stranger, after all, and he might resent it now."

She thought over this suggestion. "Perhaps," she said, "but I should like you to hear the truth. You will know his name, and I expect people are still telling lies about him everywhere. It happened so short a time ago. His name, you know, is Welburn—ex-Lieutenant Richard Welburn."

She leant forward and stared at me. I ransacked my memory in vain for any history connected with the name. When I informed Miss Amelia of this she looked slightly incredulous.

"Dear me, very odd!" she said. "But perhaps you don't read the newspapers. Well! If you really haven't heard the lies, perhaps there's no particular point in telling you the truth at present. Later, when you have met him and see what a fine manly fellow they have ruined—but here

comes Jane with the tea. Jane, Mr *preux chevalier* says that it's no use your protesting ; you really are the most perfectly finished specimen of a dragon. As for you," she went on, turning to me, "you're to give your whole attention to admiring the Spode tea-service. It's only produced on solemn occasions. Have you brought an extra cup in case Mr Dick comes back, Jane?"

"Yes, Miss Amelia," said Jane.

The bony old hand which poured out my tea was very tremulous that afternoon, and the wonderful Spode, which I duly admired, had several narrow escapes. But though Miss Amelia was so weak physically, and certainly ought to have been in bed, her spirit was undaunted, and she proved herself a most charming conversationalist. She catechised me concerning my tastes, my aims and ambitions, and afterwards she told me a great deal of her history. In her youth she had travelled widely, and I found that her passion for Italy was at least as warm as my own ; she spoke of old pictures and old books with knowledge and enthusiasm ; she had a real sense of humour and was refreshingly free from prejudice. I found myself thinking very soon that the blighted Mr Dick, if he

had any appreciation of personality, was not greatly to be pitied; if he had experienced ill fortune in the Army he had certainly been lucky beyond the wont of man in the companionship of his aunt. In earlier days she had known a great number of interesting people, and she had remembered countless anecdotes, not one of them dull; her reminiscences, however, did not include the last quarter of a century, a period which, I decided, she had spent in retirement that was enforced by unexpected poverty. Oddly enough, she seemed to have no sense of the length of this later stage in her life, and spoke of the time when she had suffered a serious financial reverse as if it were merely a few months before.

Mr Dick did not appear, and I am afraid that I was scarcely troubled by his absence. At the end of the hour allotted to me by Jane I felt that I had really found a delightful friend, and I was well on the road to believing that if he had joined us I should have been capable of experiencing a genuine sensation of jealousy. There was no doubt of Miss Amelia's devotion to her nephew; whenever a footstep sounded in the street outside she would listen for a moment and then shake

her head. "Not *his* step. Not springy enough!" she would murmur with a regretful smile. She reverted to him again shortly before I went away, told me various amusing anecdotes of his boyhood—he seemed to have been a really jolly scapegrace—and produced photographs of him in frocks, in Etons, and in uniform. The last showed him to be a good-looking, frank-eyed young fellow, with a weak mouth; the uniform seemed oddly old-fashioned, I thought; but my ignorance of things military is gigantic, and I made no comment to that effect.

The sight of the photograph of Dick in his tunic evidently produced a great emotional effect on her; she murmured some incoherent words and there were tears in her eyes. Next moment, however, she was looking at me almost defiantly.

"I am a foolish old woman!" she cried. "He isn't done yet. He's only beginning his life, his real life. Very soon all that went before—all the misery—will be like a forgotten dream." Her voice became splendid; it rang a challenge to the whole world. "Look at his face," she concluded, thrusting the photograph into my hands; "look at him, and tell me if *you* think he's done!"

She was like an inspired and bony prophetess, and her enthusiasm was really infectious. "Of course he's not done!" I said. "His real life is all before him, as you say. I only wish that I could be of some use to him," I added, rather feebly. "If *you* think he has been badly treated, I'm prepared to assert it everywhere."

She smiled and put her hand on my arm.

"You *can* be of use to him," she said. "Be his friend."

"If he'll allow it," I said. "I feel as if I were his friend already. You'll let me come again."

"Oh, of course *we* are friends!" cried Miss Amelia. I thought that it was a very graceful answer to my demand. A few minutes later the watchful Jane entered the room and drove me forth.

III.

Nearly a week had passed before I was able to pay another visit to Miss Amelia. I found her very feeble and somewhat annoyed because her eyes had failed, and she could not read, or even play Patience. "Jane

reads to me," she explained, "but she never will learn the difference between a comma and a semicolon, and always says 'hem!' every other minute." She was in good spirits, however, and gave me a warm welcome. "I've a nice surprise for you to-day," she said, after she had answered or parried my questions about her health. "The doctor came this morning—Jane quite absurdly insisted on sending for him—and I told him all about you and Dick's stupid shyness. He's a vulgar little man, but he has a great liking for Dick, and he promised to talk to him seriously about you. I don't know how he managed it—but Dick told me this afternoon that he would be glad to see you."

"Good!" I cried. "If he had avoided me much longer I should have begun to think that he was a myth."

Miss Amelia laughed. "Oh! Dick is substantial enough," she said; "though I wish he would eat more. It's my belief that he smokes far too much; I expect that when you go into his room you'll find a dense blue fog. But it's his only luxury, so I never say anything to him about it."

"I'm a great smoker myself," I said, "so

I'm afraid that I shan't set him a good example. Where is his room, by the way?"

"At the top of the house," answered Miss Amelia. "The door is on the right at the head of the stairs. I wish I could go up with you, but I'm afraid that's out of the question. However, the dragon shall show you the way when you've told me all the news."

"I won't trouble the dragon," I said. "I'll steal up and burst upon him unannounced. That'll be more informal and jolly."

Miss Amelia nodded approval. "I thought at first that he had better come down and meet you here," she went on; "but I'm sure that you would both prefer to be alone together and smoke your pipes and cigars. Dear me! I feel quite excited about it! It's rash to prophesy, but I don't mind telling you in confidence that you're perfectly certain to get on together splendidly. You're not unlike each other; when I first set eyes on you I do believe that if I hadn't heard your voice just before, I should have mistaken you for him. But your mouth is weaker than his." I could not help smiling as I remembered my unuttered criticism of Dick's photograph. "You're much the same build, and

nearly the same height; at least if you had been in the Army, and had to hold yourself properly, you would have looked nearly as tall. I like tall fellows; and, would you believe it, when I was young the only men who fell in love with me were little niminy-piminies. I laughed at them all; a nice figure of fun I should have made with a beau as high as my elbow, shouldn't I? So here I am a poor old maid, and no one'll marry me now. Don't look alarmed, Mr *preux chevalier*; I'm not trying to catch *you*."

"I only wish you would," I replied. "I wasn't looking alarmed; I was looking sulky, because first of all you said that I resembled your wonderful nephew, and then you proceeded to explain that I was in all respects his inferior. I believe that really I'm far better and wiser and equally beautiful."

She leant forward and smiled. "I'll tell you one thing," she said, "in which you resemble him exactly. I can't tell your footsteps apart. Each time that I've heard yours outside the room I've thought that you were Dick."

"Oh, I shall supplant him yet," I said. "And now I shall go to call on him. You

look tired," I added ; "I had better say good-bye to you."

"No, no!" she cried. "You must come back and tell me all about it. I expect Dick will come down with you, and we'll all have tea together."

"Jane will have something to say about that!" I said. Miss Amelia looked naughtily defiant.

"Bother Jane!" she remarked.

As I went upstairs I found myself wondering what kind of a reception I should be given by the recluse in the attic. In spite of the pæans that Miss Amelia had sung in his praise, I was tolerably certain that Master Dick was rather a bear, and disapproved of my intrusions; otherwise he would at least have had the grace to thank me for rescuing his aunt from the regardant errand-boys. I was conscious of a sensation which had scarcely visited me since my school-days,—a sensation produced by a summons from a master to visit his study for reasons unknown or gloomily suspected. This was ridiculous, I told myself; I was without reproach, and if any one had behaved badly, it was the morose Dick; yet the fact re-

mained that as I climbed the last flight of stairs I was strangely nervous, and when I halted outside the door on the right, I felt that nothing but my affection for Miss Amelia would have forced me to face the ordeal of knocking on its panel.

I *did* knock, however, but heard no voice that summoned me to enter. I waited for a moment, then knocked again, equally fruitlessly. Probably, I thought, Mr Dick, like most bears, was indulging in a protracted siesta. Once more I heartily thumped the panels, and then I turned the handle, opened the door and entered the room.

I found myself in a large attic that was comfortably furnished in ordinary masculine taste; there were large leather arm-chairs and an oak table; stags' heads looked mildly down from the walls, and the few pictures were of a sporting character. Mr Dick, unlike his aunt, evidently did not care for photographs; there was only one in the room, and that was the portrait of a girl in the costume, I think, of the late seventies or early eighties; she wore a jersey and a pleated skirt, and her hair was frizzed like a Zulu's. I observed these details after I had realised that the owner of the room was absent. Mr

Dick had evidently avoided me once again; the only trace that remained of him was a strong smell of stale tobacco smoke.

I was annoyed when I found that, after all, I might have spared myself my doubts and fears on the staircase, and after I had waited for five minutes, I made uncomplimentary remarks concerning Mr Dick's methods of behaviour, and decided to return for another talk with Miss Amelia. Then it occurred to me that she would be very much worried when she heard that my errand was fruitless; so I planted myself in one of the arm-chairs and resolved to await my absent host until midnight, if necessary. He had made an appointment with me, after all, and it would be an uncommon pleasure to put him to shame when he tardily appeared.

The stags' heads contemplated me with mild and respectful interest, and I stared at them, at the pictures, and at the lady in the jersey for about twenty minutes. I was beginning to feel heartily bored when I heard the sound of feet that ascended the stairs. At last, I thought, I was to meet the mysterious nephew, who, by the way, seemed even then to be in no particular hurry. I rose, and by the time the door opened had

prepared a neat speech which would heap coals of fire on his perfidious head. But it was lost labour, for no male figure appeared on the threshold. Instead, I was confronted by the sturdy shape of Jane.

Though she had walked so leisurely upstairs she seemed slightly out of breath, and looked at me in a peculiar manner. Once again I had a momentary idea that she regarded me as a burglar; but before I could explain my presence in the room her words showed that she knew what had happened.

“Miss Amelia has just told me that you were here, sir,” she said quietly. “I’m afraid from what she said that you’ve been waiting for some time.”

“For nearly half an hour, Jane,” I answered, in the tone of a patient martyr. “She arranged with Mr Dick that I should meet him here, but he seems to have discovered a subsequent engagement.”

I sat down again in one of the arm-chairs. Jane stood regarding me with the same intent expression for some moments, then she entered the room, closed the door, and walked deliberately towards me.

“I think it’s high time that you were told something, sir,” she said, halting in front of

me. "I would have done it before, but I thought perhaps you would find out for yourself, like the doctor did. You've heard a lot about meeting Mr Dick. I'd better tell you once and for all that you'll *never* meet him."

She spoke firmly, but I could see that she was agitated.

"Do you mean," I asked, "that Mr Dick refuses to have anything to do with me—that he doesn't like my coming to the house?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, sir!" she said slowly, "haven't you seen it all? There is no Mr Dick."

I gazed at her with intense astonishment.

"No Mr Dick!" I echoed. "Do you mean—" She cut me short.

"I mean that he's all imagination," she said. "The real Mr Dick died more than twenty years ago. Whether his ghost haunts this house or not is more than I can say, but I've never seen it, at any rate. Sometimes I wish I could, for to hear Miss Amelia talking and listening to some one you can't hear or see is a great strain on the nerves. I'd have borne it for no one else but her."

I gasped. I had formed so complete an

idea of the personality of the nephew, I had felt the sense of his actual presence in the place so strongly, that for a moment I was visited with a wild suspicion that he had suborned Jane into collaborating with him in a mad joke at my expense. But the aspect of that faithful retainer's face was enough to explode this theory.

"Well, it's extraordinary!" I said feebly. "And how long has he—has this state of things existed?"

"More than twenty years, sir," answered Jane. Her agitation seemed to have passed away, and she spoke calmly. "It's twenty-two, I think, since I first began to pretend he was still here."

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that you've managed to—to keep it up; to go on pretending for all those years?"

Jane nodded. "Yes, sir," she answered. "It wasn't very difficult, with poor Miss Amelia always seeing him and imagining that he talked to her. I knew very soon that if I *didn't* pretend she would get miserable and perhaps come to her senses."

I stared again at this remarkable woman.

"But why didn't you want her to come to her senses?" I cried.

Jane looked at me almost pitifully.

“Don’t you see, sir,” she explained, “that if she’d come to her senses she’d have realised that Mr Dick wasn’t there, and she’d just have died of grief? It was far better to keep up the pretence and leave her happy. The doctor said just the same; he pretends he’s a friend of Mr Dick’s and comes here to have a talk with him whenever he calls.”

“Ah!” I said, “that accounts for the smell of smoke.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Jane. “Though when he didn’t come I often burnt some tobacco on a tray. Any little thing like that, or leaving the room untidy, just as Mr Dick used to, helps to keep Miss Amelia happy, and keep her from doubting that he is still here.”

For some moments I meditated silently over Jane’s astounding revelation. “By this time you must almost feel that he *is* still here,” I said.

“Sometimes I do, sir,” Jane answered. “And in a kind of a way he really is here; he lives on, you might say, in Miss Amelia’s heart. I don’t think that any one quite dies when they’re remembered as she remembers

Mr Dick. But if he knows, and does live here in spirit, I haven't seen him."

"Then Miss Amelia has forgotten all about his death?" I asked.

Jane smoothed her apron with both hands.

"Thank God for that, sir," she said simply. "After the news came she was at death's door herself for two months, and when she was better we found that she remembered nothing later than the time before he died, when he was living with her. Sometimes, on one of her bad days, she'll have a dim sort of idea that she has had dreadful news from Paris—Mr Dick died in Paris—and she'll be miserable, but as soon as she sees his things lying about in this room she begins to imagine that he's back here again. It's at times like that when I have to be extra careful to keep up the pretence. I've even told her that I thought Mr Dick looked well, or tired. Those were lies, I suppose, and I don't know what you'll think of me, but I do believe, sir, you'd have done just the same if you'd been in my place. It all helped to give my mistress a happy old age."

"Was Mr Dick's death sudden?" I asked. Jane replied that he had been found drowned in the Seine. His history, of which she gave

me an outline, was apparently as follows. He had been obliged to leave the Army because he had become involved in some discreditable gambling affair. Whether he had been accused of cheating, or whether he was the scapegoat of others, I do not know; but at any rate there was a vast scandal, and at the time when he resigned his commission he owed very large sums to money-lenders. His relatives, who were furious that he had disgraced a name famous in the military annals of England, refused to have anything more to do with him, except Miss Amelia, who quarrelled with them all on his account, realised most of her capital in order to pay his debts, and buried herself with him in the obscure street where I had met her.

They lived together for about a year; Dick attempted in vain to find any employment, and became, I imagine, more and more miserable. At last he went to Paris; a fortnight later his body was recognised in the Morgue by a former brother officer who was engaged in visiting the artistic attractions of the city.

Jane concluded his history with a gesture in the direction of the young woman in a jersey.

"That was his young lady, sir," she explained. "We thought her pretty and good, but she threw him over, like all the rest of them. Miss Amelia won't have anything to do with any of the family," she went on. "'If Dick's not good enough for them I'm not good enough,' she says. She's a lady of great spirit, sir, as I expect you've seen."

I did not answer. I was engaged in reflecting that my idea of Kentish Town and Gospel Oak as places where only unimportant persons dwelt and only drab and sordid events happened was singularly foolish. For me, Miss Amelia and her Jane shone with all the splendour of heroines of romance, and the dark little house became radiant with a fine light of love and devotion.

"So this," I said at last, "was why you looked at me so queerly that day when Miss Amelia fainted in the street?"

Jane smiled. "I didn't know what sort of a person you might be, sir, and I heard Miss Amelia ask you to come again and meet Mr Dick. I didn't know whether you'd be able to do as the doctor does. He's very kind about it, though of course he looks on it all as a joke, and pretends that Mr Dick is fond of ladies and a gay life." She paused for a

moment, looking at me almost anxiously. "You will be able to do it, I hope, sir?" she asked.

"You mean—to keep up the pretence?" I said.

"That's it," said Jane. "It's got to be done," she added firmly.

I was silent for a short time. In the excitement of hearing her story I had ignored the new complication that was created by my visit to Dick's room. "It will be rather difficult, won't it?" I asked.

Jane's expression instantly became stern.

"Difficult or not, it has to be done," she said quickly. "You must make up your mind to that, sir. If you can't do it, if your conscience won't let you—" she paused.

"If I can't do it I mustn't come here again, you mean," I said.

Jane made a grave gesture of assent.

"Never again," she said. "And that would be hard on Miss Amelia. She's taken to you, one can see." She looked at me steadily and then she smiled. "Oh! you'll do it!" she cried suddenly.

And at that instant I certainly felt that I would do anything for Miss Amelia—and for Jane. "I believe you're a witch!" I said, and

held out my hand. We stood there for a moment like two conspirators swearing some infernal pact. "I'll have a try, at any rate," I said.

"I knew you would, sir," said Jane. "But don't go to see her now. She's tired, and it would be difficult for you. Next time you come I don't think you'll find it hard."

"Jane," I said, "you're a treasure among women."

"I've done my duty," said Jane briefly, "though it has been one long lie."

I am almost ashamed to add that, after forming this alliance in duplicity, I sneaked past Miss Amelia's door with the utmost caution, and drew a deep breath of relief when I was safely in the street. As I walked home I began to realise the difficulty of the task to which I had pledged myself, and I confess that I quailed before it. Nevertheless, Jane was right; nothing should be allowed to disturb Miss Amelia's illusions. I told myself that if I proved incapable of playing my part decently, my obvious duty would be to retire from the stage altogether. But this, now that I was deeply in love both with Miss Amelia and with Jane, was a thoroughly impossible prospect.

IV.

Five or six days passed, I think, before I was able to present myself again at Miss Amelia's door. I had still some doubt as to whether I should be able to take a successful part in Jane's conspiracy, but none concerning the morality of joining it; the more I thought about it the more I was convinced that this was the only possible course for me to follow. My *rôle*, I knew, would be more difficult than that of Jane; it was easy for her, a servant, to keep silence when Miss Amelia was talking to the invisible presence of her nephew; but I should be obliged to join in such conversations, a proceeding that would demand intense tact.

In spite of this imminent difficulty, and in defiance of a yellow fog that brooded over Kentish Town, I was in high spirits when I knocked at Miss Amelia's door; the prospect of seeing her again really was wonderfully elating. When Jane opened the door I beamed on her with the utmost benevolence, and was surprised to observe that she received me without a smile. Her honest face looked drawn and anxious, and there were dark semicircles below her eyes.

"Oh, sir," she said, "Miss Amelia can't see you to-day. She's in bed, and I'm afraid she's very bad indeed. She's never been like this before. But please to come in."

I followed her into Miss Amelia's room. There was no fire, and in the jaundiced light of the foggy afternoon the place was depressing and shabby.

"How long has she been ill?" I asked. Jane waited for a moment before answering.

"Ever since you went away on Saturday," she said. "And the doctor doesn't like her looks at all. She doesn't recognise any one; her sight's nearly gone, but I'm afraid that it's not only because of that. She's dreadfully miserable!" Poor Jane ended with almost a groan, and for a moment I thought that she was about to break down.

"Miserable?" I echoed. "What is making her miserable? Does she think that something is wrong with him—with Mr Dick?"

Jane nodded, looking very grave.

"Yes," she said. "That's what's the matter. On Saturday, just after you had gone, she thought that he came to talk to her, and she got the idea that he didn't like you, that he was kind of jealous of you, and that he was going away to Paris. Her memory seemed

to come back, partly at least, and she has been in a dreadful state, crying and talking about bodies being found in a river."

The tears were running down her cheeks as she finished speaking. I stared at her blankly, feeling a heavy weight growing above my heart.

"Then it's all my fault," I said. "I oughtn't to have come here again. But can't you persuade her that Dick has returned?"

She shook her head. "I've tried and tried," she answered, "but it's no good; it only makes her angry. She's quite certain that he's in Paris and that he's in some danger. I'm dreading every moment that she'll realise he's dead; several times to-day she's remembered things that have happened just before she got the news of his body being found."

"And if she realises that he is dead?" I asked.

"It'll kill her this time," replied Jane. "The doctor says so. When a person has been queer like that for so long and becomes right in the head again suddenly, it means that it's the end. And a miserable end too, poor thing! I'd always thought that she would die happy, thinking that Mr Dick was with her to the last."

I inquired if the doctor came often. "He's

very good," Jane answered; "he comes twice a-day, and he sat up for a long time the other night. The sleeping-draught couldn't calm her. He made me have a nurse, but she's a giggling thing and mad about play-actors. She talks to me about Lewis Waller, or some such name, until I could turn her out of the house. She's upstairs now trying on a new bonnet. Miss Amelia's asleep for once."

Silence fell upon us. The fog had thickened, and the room was almost dark. Outside, some sparrows were twittering disconsolately in the bedraggled shrubs. I felt wretched, and reviled myself for not having discovered earlier that Miss Amelia's nephew was a hallucination, and that my visits to the haunted house were likely to have a troublesome result. Yet how could I have known? Jane was certainly not to blame; she had warned me as soon as she perceived that I had realised nothing and that my visits were likely to be frequent. The whole affair was a most unfortunate accident, though, for a moment, I felt almost inclined to believe that Dick had been actually present—in the spirit, as Jane expressed it—and had behaved exactly as he would have done if I had put in an appearance at his aunt's house during the time of his trouble.

"Do you think it would be of any use," I asked at last, "if I went up to see her when she is awake, and told her that there isn't any truth in her idea that Dick doesn't like me?"

Jane dismissed this suggestion at once.

"She wouldn't know you," she said. "And if she did, she wouldn't believe you. And, anyhow, it would make no difference. What's worrying her is that she thinks he has gone to Paris."

"But if I could persuade her," I said, "that he has just gone for a holiday and not because he is annoyed at my coming here, wouldn't things be better?"

Jane shook her head.

"You wouldn't be able to persuade her," she answered. "You see, she thinks he has told her all about it. It's your word against his."

Once again I felt a sharp sense of the reality of Dick.

"Confound him!" I murmured.

Jane overheard me, and I saw, much to my surprise, that she was regarding me sympathetically.

"I've often felt like that too, sir," she said. "Times and times it's seemed as if he

was really there and was just being aggravating on purpose. But it doesn't do, I found, to let oneself think that. If I hadn't made up my mind not to believe in him I don't know what would have happened to my head."

I looked at her. "I suppose he wasn't really there, Jane?" I said.

Jane made an almost violent gesture with her hands.

"Lord save us, sir!" she cried. "Don't *you* begin to believe in him!" She was silent for a moment, then continued: "It's only in Miss Amelia's memory that he lives, as I told you before. But the funny thing is that she remembers him so well—his character, I mean. His ghost, as you might say, behaves exactly as he would have behaved if he had been alive and remained a young man of four-and-twenty. He wasn't always a nice gentleman, was Mr Dick; after he left the Army his temper was very queer, and his ghost—you know what I mean when I say ghost—is just the same. I've often heard Miss Amelia talking as if he were in a dreadful rage, and she was trying to calm him down. It was just like him—like the real Mr Dick, I mean,

sir—to go off in a huff because you were coming to the house."

"But did he do that when other people came?" I asked.

"No other people *did* come," Jane answered. "Lady Soames, Miss Amelia's sister, tried to, a great many times; but he couldn't bear her, and made Miss Amelia tell her to keep away. Oh dear! oh dear!" she cried suddenly. "There we go again!"

"What is the matter?" I demanded.

"It seems as if we neither of us could help talking as if he really existed," said Jane. "And I won't do it!" she concluded almost violently.

I rose to go, telling Jane I would call again very soon for news of her mistress. "And if I can be of any use," I added, giving her a card, "telegraph to this address. I'm nearly always in, and I'll come at once."

Jane thanked me rather perfunctorily. Evidently she was convinced that for the present I could be of no use whatever. I went back to the Temple and attempted to work, but I could think of nothing but Miss Amelia. Of course it was absurd, but try as I would, I was unable to dispel the idea

that the long-dead Dick was a real and malignant entity who was compelling her, merely from spiteful motives, to endure again all the anguish that his suicide had caused her twenty-two years before.

V.

I called at the house every afternoon during the following week, and on each occasion I was confronted by a white and anxious Jane who had no good news to impart. Miss Amelia was terribly weak; she continued to recognise no one, and lived entirely in a painful world of her imagination. The one consoling fact about her malady was that she was convinced that Dick was alive, though absent, and she seemed to have forgotten about his suicide. But she was terribly worried because he did not return, and lay listening for his footstep all day and for most of the night. She was almost blind, and it was nearly impossible to persuade her to take any food. I was not allowed, of course, to see her, for she still, apparently, regarded me as the

cause of Dick's absence, and spoke of my intrusion with warm resentment.

On the tenth day of her illness I found Jane in a state of deep despondency; Miss Amelia had sunk into a comatose condition, from which she only awoke at long intervals to demand if her nephew had returned. To soothe her, Jane had tried to pretend that he was in the house; but Miss Amelia, after sitting up in bed and staring at the ceiling with sightless eyes for some moments, had shaken her head wistfully, and then, falling back on her pillows, relapsed into torpor. The doctor, Jane added, took a gloomy view of her condition, and asserted that unless she could be induced to believe that Dick had returned safely, there was only the slightest hope of her recovery.

I had gone back to my room each day feeling more and more depressed, and Jane's latest bulletin made me sick at heart. Poor Miss Amelia! If any one deserved a peaceful death, she was the person; her long devotion to her nephew's memory seemed, whenever I thought of it, both noble and beautiful, and if she had been mad, there were many worse things in the world than

a madness which took the form of single-hearted loyalty to an unfortunate boy. I reproached myself for having returned to the little house, and reviled the fate which had led me to explore Kentish Town on that Saturday afternoon. I was the cause —although a quite innocent cause—of all Miss Amelia's later sufferings; if she died I should be indirectly responsible for her death, and I could do nothing but wait. It was a singularly disheartening position.

I sat by a dying fire for an hour, the prey of most melancholy foreboding; then, I suppose, I went to sleep, and dreamt that I was back in Miss Amelia's room, for I remember that a loud knocking at my door made me spring up from my chair and stand staring about me in stupid bewilderment. There was another series of tremendous knocks, and I opened the door, to discover a small telegraph-boy, who thrust a yellow-brown envelope into my hand. I tore it open. The telegram which it contained was very brief: *Come at once.—Jane* —was all that it said. I told the boy that there was no answer, and that light-hearted bearer of evil tidings departed whistling. That the tidings were evil I had no doubt;

Jane would not have telegraphed unless Miss Amelia was worse. I ran up Middle Temple Lane, colliding with various belated barristers, and found a cab opposite the Law Courts. Twenty minutes later I stood once more on the steps of the little house.

Jane opened the door before I had rung the bell; evidently she had been on the look-out for me. Without speaking, she led me into Miss Amelia's sitting-room. Her face was dreadfully haggard, and her lips were set in a tense line.

"How is she?" I asked in a low voice.

"Very, very bad," Jane answered in the same tone. "It's the end, I'm afraid. The doctor says so; he's with her now. She's fretting and fretting."

"Does she think that he is dead?" I demanded.

"No," said Jane. "She's expecting him to come back every minute, and worrying because he doesn't come. It seems almost as if she were too weak to imagine him any more—to trick herself into seeing him and hearing him, I mean. She does nothing but moan, except when she stops to listen. I feel now a kind of certainty that he won't come, that he's disappeared for ever, poor

Mr. Dick. And that's why I sent for you."

"You think she won't dislike me now?" I asked.

Jane shook her head. "It isn't that," she said. She looked at me once more with her strange penetrating scrutiny, and went on: "She won't know you. She's nearly blind, and no one exists for her except him. That's why I want you to go up to see her."

I stared at her, hopelessly bewildered by this obscure speech. She continued to regard me with intensely solemn eyes. "You understand, don't you?" she said, after a moment.

I shook my head. "Oh! don't you see," she cried sharply, "that I'd do anything for her to die in peace,—even trick her and deceive her? It's only a chance, of course; she may find it all out at once, like she did before when I pretended he was in the house; only she's much weaker now. There's only one thing that you've got to remember,—you mustn't speak. Whatever she says, remember that she hears the answer in her mind."

I realised then what Jane meant.

"You want me to be—him?" I said.

She nodded eagerly. "Don't say you can't do it, sir!" she cried. "It's the last chance, and whatever you may think about it, I know it's right. You've heard of doctors giving dying people drugs to keep off the pain,—well, this is like giving a drug; one wouldn't do it except to stop her suffering, and let her die in peace."

I felt very uncomfortable. No doubt Jane was right as usual, yet there was something dreadful in playing any kind of trick on one who was dying. "I'll come up," I said; "but I won't promise anything except that I'll not speak. And you mustn't tell her that I am Dick."

An expression of deep relief came over Jane's face. "I won't do that, sir," she answered. "For one thing," she added, "it wouldn't be any use."

After we had ascended one flight of stairs, I heard Miss Amelia's voice. She was moaning on one note, like a child in pain. The sound sent a chill to my heart, and for a moment I felt that I would give everything that I possessed to be able to rush out of the house. As we reached the door of her bedroom, however, the sound ceased

with an abruptness that was almost shocking. Jane knocked at the door, waited for a moment, and then opened it.

The scene that met my eyes will haunt me until I have lost all power to think. Miss Amelia was sitting up in bed, leaning forward. She was thinner than I had imagined it possible for a living creature to be; her shoulders were like knife-blades beneath her night-gown, her hands, which gripped the bedclothes, had become yellow claws, and her neck was like twisted parchment. But the splendour of her face was indescribable; her eyes were two burning stars, and her smile had an unearthly sweetness that recalled all the pictures which one had ever seen of saints in ecstasy. She held out both her wasted hands with a wonderful gesture.

“Dick, dear Dick,” she said loudly, triumphantly. “I knew your step! You’ve come at last! And I know that you’ll never leave me any more.” I stood there, torn between wonder at her face and shame at the part that I was playing. It seemed impossible that those brilliant eyes could not see me, or, if they saw me, transfigured me to a vision of the dead. The doctor, who was standing by the bed, made an emphatic sign to me; I went forward and took Miss

Amelia's hands. She kissed me, and then sank back on her pillows.

"Now I can sleep," she said, with a deep sigh, and closed her eyes.

The peace in her face was the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen. I sat by her bedside for an hour holding one of her hands. When I went away she was still lost in deep slumber.

Was it a disgraceful trick to play? She died without pain three days afterwards, perfectly happy, convinced that her nephew was with her to the last. I attended the funeral, which was honoured by the presence of several of her distinguished relatives. They were truly magnificent types of aristocracy, and their demeanour, whilst exquisitely correct, betrayed no hint of inward grief.

When it was all over, and the tawny earth was being shovelled on the plain coffin that contained Miss Amelia's worn-out body, I walked out of the cemetery with Jane. Jane was calm once more, though she had broken down at the graveside, and seriously interrupted the somewhat perfunctory periods of the chilly curate who conducted the service. I questioned her about her future; she informed me that she was to live with her sister in Birmingham—a

town which she seemed, Cockney that she was, to regard as the most rural of retreats, —and that she had saved sufficiently to assure herself a comfortable old age. We did not speak of Miss Amelia until we were about to part at the cemetery gates.

“You won’t forget her, will you, sir?” she asked me, as we shook hands. I replied that Miss Amelia’s memory would be with me always. Jane gave me one of her grave, slow nods.

“That’s right,” she said. “When that happens people don’t really die. All this,” she made a gesture indicating the cemetery, “all this is nothing. It’s in other people’s hearts that one really lives. *She taught me that.*”

I felt suddenly inclined to choke. “Poor thing, poor thing!” I said.

But Jane corrected me with her usual wisdom.

“Don’t think of her like that, sir,” she said. “She lived happy, except for that one great trouble, and she died happy too. It’s a funny world,” she added after a moment. “I sometimes think that the people it likes to call mad have all the best of things, and aren’t the worst in it either.”

And with this profound sentiment Jane went out of my life.

MARIA

M A R I A.

I.

I MET Maria first in the early nineties, when she was twenty-five and I was still a schoolboy. Even in that remote epoch, with its placid Victorian air yet unshaken by the mild thunder of 'The Second Mrs Tanqueray' and 'The Heavenly Twins,' it seemed strange that she should have been endowed with so sampleresque a name; and stranger that she was invariably addressed by it. I remember that on the occasion of our first meeting I decided instantly that she should have been a Muriel, a Mabel, or a Margaret, like all the rest of the dear creatures who were chattering and playing tennis and eating ices in a large suburban garden that has long been the prey of the jerry-builder,

probably, indeed, of several successive jerry-builders. Also, I remember, I decided instantly that she was far the prettiest girl in the garden, if not in the world. I am not at all certain that I didn't fall in love with her. Sensibility had not wholly decayed in the Victorian twilight; romance was mildly rampant at garden parties in spite of the curates, and Maria was really very charming. She wore large sleeves like legs of mutton, and didn't become purple in the neck when she played tennis. She had very bright brown eyes and a sharp small nose and a complexion like a rose-leaf. Of course, one was sorry that she wasn't like Lorna Doone—Lorna Doone was a feminine ideal that one would never, all one's life, be able to get away from—but still, in her way, she was almost as jolly, and knew how to talk to boys probably better than Lorna. . . . We discovered that we were distant cousins, but that, said Maria, didn't matter; we would contrive to be friends in spite of the relationship. The remark, I remember, bothered me a good deal at the time. When I asked Thicknesse major about it in the following term, he explained that it was a paradox and that I was an ass. (Thicknesse

major was the fellow in my house who was afterwards nearly expelled because he took in the Yellow Book.)

Maria's friendliness was flattering to a shy youth, who was not, however, too shy to perceive that she was extremely popular; the suburban swains hovered round her like butterflies about a flower, and she seemed to be on terms of extreme intimacy with their sisters and parents. The swains were decent fellows on the whole; they played tennis with immense gravity and were profuse in apologies to their partners; some of them wore scarlet sashes with their flannels, for which, if they had been at my school, they would have been beaten and kicked. The girls I contrived to avoid very neatly, except when I had to play tennis with them. I remember nothing about them except that they called me *Mr Lane*—an innovation which was immensely dignifying.

Late in the afternoon Maria's mother, a small but stately lady with a notable gift of silence and a bonnet adorned with enormous cherries and forget-me-nots, came out of the house and contemplated the tennis with the air of a High Priestess of Vestals at a gladiatorial show. I was led up to her,

and she talked to me about relatives who, I have every reason to believe, had been dead for some considerable time. She also spoke disparagingly of tennis and favourably of croquet, but in spite of this error in taste, I felt that she was kind. Maria's brother was not present; he was supposed to be managing a branch of the family business "in the East"; but Maria's sister, the eldest of the family, appeared for a moment, surveyed the scene with a kind of nervous contempt, shook hands hurriedly with a few people, and then vanished. She was fifteen years older than Maria, unmarried, and an inveterate frequenter of churches. Large and stout, with dull eyes, she gave me the impression of being unsympathetic and quite unpleasantly unlike any one whom I had ever met before. A fatal passion for sermons, I discovered afterwards, had possessed her from her earliest years. Her name was Ellen. I met her again when Maria took me to see the house; Ellen, apparently, was house-keeper, and Maria announced to her that I was to stay to dinner. Ellen stared at me as if I were a new kind of beast, moved her lower jaw slowly up and down without opening her mouth, and at last remarked:

"Arthur won't like staying to dinner if he hasn't his evening clothes. And you know that mother is very particular."

I felt horribly crushed, but Maria put her hand on my shoulder and spoke with startling sharpness. "Nonsense!" she said. "Mother doesn't mind a bit, and of course Arthur won't. Mr Walem is coming too. He'll be in his tennis things, so you needn't be shy, Arthur."

"Euh!" said Ellen, and sniffed. I looked at Maria, and was astonished to see that her pretty face was twitching with irritation. She screwed up her mouth to the thinnest possible line and marched me out of the room. I ventured some blundering apology for not possessing the needful garments, but she interrupted me. "It's all right," she said, rather breathlessly; "Cousin Ellen's always like that. She doesn't mean it." She continued to look extremely cross.

The house, like everything in it, was large and solid. So was the dinner, when we sat beneath a portrait of Maria's defunct father, a ponderous gentleman with whiskers, a frilled shirt-front, and taper fingers that seemed too elegant to be true. It was long before I freed myself from a vague notion

that this picture was the result of some mechanical process, though in reality it was the work of a prominent, if not eminent, painter who flourished in the fifties and sixties. I disliked the picture, however, for reasons personal rather than artistic; the late Mr Bastable had a pair of shrewd little blue eyes, which always looked as if he had just made a very successful and satirical joke at my expense. Whether making jokes was really a habit of his during his life, I never ascertained; but he certainly made an immense quantity of money, and there was substantial proof of his success in the gold plate which gleamed on table and sideboard, the statues of Innocence, Purity, Faith, Modesty, and other delightful virtues in the hall, and two large and ugly Landseers in the drawing-room.

His widow spoke very little during dinner, and the grim Ellen was mute; Maria atoned for their silence with an incessant stream of talk, addressing herself rather to me than to Mr Walem, who was a heavy young man with a red face, a protruding lower lip, and blue-black hair. I thought her prettier than ever; she had put on a white silk dress trimmed with blue ribbons, there was a

diamond star in her fluffy hair, and her eyes were brighter than the diamonds. She looked delightfully fresh, neat, and gay; one felt, somehow, that she would always be happy, and diffuse happiness around her; one knew at once that she was so tremendously kind! Nevertheless, her methods of speech were bewildering to a shy youth; she had very strongly the aspect of a bright bird, and the methods were bird-like; she was perpetually hopping from one conversational twig to another, and I, personally, felt far too heavy to follow her airy track successfully. Mr Walem, who was painfully literal, apparently didn't try. "Oh, I say, you know! What's that got to do with it?" was his frequent remonstrance. Maria would look at him with her little eyes gleaming more brightly than ever. "You're so *slow!*" she would chirp in an extremely high note. "I can't *think* why men are so *slow!*" Whenever she said this, or something else to much the same effect, Mrs Bastable would giggle silently and look at Mr Walem obliquely with a quizzical eye. Mr Walem would look at his plate and frown.

Maria asked me many questions about Winchester; she was, I decided, strangely ignor-

ant, seeming to think that it was a school for little kids, like one of those beastly private places where the master's wife tucked you up in bed, and gave you Gregory powder and other filth. Towards the end of dinner, just as I was beginning my second portion of pine-apple, Mrs Bastable and Ellen rose and withdrew to the drawing-room. Walem, Maria, and I stayed for some time in the dining-room and ate peaches, but when I was about to take a bunch of grapes, she said to me, "Now, little boy, you must trot along and talk to mother." I had to go, of course, and she stayed with Walem. When I entered the drawing-room—a vast place, all gilding and crimson curtains—Mrs Bastable looked at me with her funny quizzical eyes, and inquired where Maria might be. When I answered, she said "Oh!" very gently. Ellen said "Euh!" I talked to Mrs Bastable about her dog, an obese Skye terrier, which gnawed me with its toothless gums when I tried to pat it; and then, as soon as Maria and Mr Walem came in, I went away. Maria made me promise to play tennis with her frequently.

I had no difficulty in keeping my promise, for I was staying in an adjacent suburb with a kind great-aunt who made no urgent de-

mands on my attention, and was anxious that I should not be dull. I saw Maria nearly every day for the next three weeks, and became wholly her slave,—if one could be the slave of such a jolly, sympathetic friend. She seemed more delightful every time I met her ; she was so splendidly alive, so immensely interested in everything ! We explored London together, and I discovered, to my vast surprise, that she had never scaled the arduous Monument or visited Madame Tussaud's dreadful temple of the thrilling. We had wonderful teas together in dusky oriental rooms that smelt of freshly ground coffee and were full of mysterious fretwork lattices and peacock feathers in brass pots,—teas during which I was torn between sensations of pleasure and guilt; for I had no pocket-money, and my father had always told me that to allow a woman to pay for one was a social crime; we encouraged the bears at the Zoological Gardens to hideous excess in the matter of buns, and we met romance face to face in gondolas at the Earl's Court Exhibition. She enjoyed it all even more than I did, I think, for I had experienced it before; she talked and laughed all day long. Once, when I tried to thank her, she

put her finger on my mouth and said, with a funny kind of gasp which I couldn't understand, "You silly boy! Don't you see that I've never had any one to take me about before?" I think it dawned on me then, though dimly, that she might have been lonely, and that even the happiest temperament in the world might become tired of Ellen and Ellen's everlasting Euhs. I must have become almost crazily devoted to her, for I actually wrote a letter of eight pages to Thicknesse major without a word of anything except her charm, though I knew perfectly well that my cynical friend would laugh immoderately when he received it, recite it to other humourists, and make my life a burden throughout the ensuing term. That didn't matter; I felt that I had to write about her, and I didn't keep a diary, only accounts.

On our last evening together I felt dreadfully low-spirited. We sat in the garden, and I expressed a faltering but fervent hope that I should see her again. I was somewhat surprised when she hesitated for a moment before replying. (She was wearing the white dress and looked, I decided, like a princess in a fairy tale.)

"Of course we shall meet very soon," she said. She paused again, then put her hand on my sleeve. "Arthur," she said, "don't think me horrid. I had better tell you now. I can't ask you to stay here."

I couldn't understand her at all. I had never considered the question of staying at Ravensholme—that was the name of their house. Her pretty face was full of trouble and I felt very uncomfortable. I grunted or growled that it was all right.

"It's not all right. It's horrid!" she said vehemently. "But it's no use! I can't ask you, and I can't tell you why."

"I know. It's cousin Ellen," I said.

"No, it's not," she said. "She likes you. I can't tell you. Only—it's the place,—the house; not cousin Ellen, remember that."

"It's a beautiful house," I said. She rose and stared at the dim pompous outline of Ravensholme.

"It's a——" she began, almost with a scream. I was tremendously startled, as she noticed next moment. "I've frightened you, Arthur," she said. She gave a little laugh and added, "You must think us all awfully queer?"

"No, I don't," I said, feeling wretchedly out of my depth.

"I suppose I oughtn't to have said anything," she went on after a while, "but I hated the idea of your thinking that I could ask you, and didn't. You understand, don't you? It's not because I won't, it's because I can't."

"Oh yes, I see," I said, wishing fervently that she would stop. My experience of women was infinitesimal, but I realised that something had made her quite unlike herself, and I felt the unpleasant sinking sensation that seizes a child when a familiar person or thing becomes suddenly strange. Next moment, however, she was standing in front of me, looking absolutely as she always looked, trim, smiling, and gay. She held out her hands and shook both of mine. "So that's all settled, isn't it?" she said. "And now I'll tell you something; a great secret. In about a year I'm going to marry Mr Walem, and then you can come and stay with us as long as ever you like."

I seized the opportunity to behave like the rude little brute that I really was. "If you marry that sickening ass," I announced, "I'll never speak to you again."

She seemed surprised but not annoyed. "Oh, well! we're not married yet," she said.

“At any rate I shall be able to see you next holidays. Then we can discuss Mr Walem.”

I was too young to perceive that this utterance was extraordinary. We arranged to meet in London, for lunch, on the first day of the Christmas holidays. But the gods mock the careful pledges of mortals. I did not see her again for several years.

II.

My father died suddenly two months after I had parted from Maria; I was obliged to leave Winchester, and spent the next four years with an aunt who had married a Frenchman and lived near Dinard. When I was eighteen I went to Paris and managed to find employment in the office of an illustrated paper. I devoted every spare moment to drawing, and after a couple of years of drudgery I was given regular work as an illustrator, and was able to afford a long course of study in several *ateliers* on the Rive Gauche. At first I had neither the time nor the money necessary for a visit to England, and perhaps, after a while, the inclination was lacking; I developed a

passion for Paris and made many friends amongst my contemporaries in the Quartier. For two or three years I kept up a desultory correspondence with Maria; she wrote most affectionate letters, but said nothing about herself and a great deal about people unknown to me who lived near her. Once, when she was going to Biarritz, she came to Dinard to see me, bringing with her as her travelling companion a strong-minded female called Miss Pole, who bicycled in knickerbockers and organised charity. Maria was as pretty as ever, talked execrable French, and was always losing every portion of her luggage as soon as Miss Pole's wary eye was off it. A short time afterwards she added as a postscript to one of her letters that her engagement to Mr Walem was broken off. It was the last letter that I received from her,—a short note, evidently written very hurriedly, and in her usual dot-and-dash method. After that I heard no more of her, and I am afraid that amid the thousand interests of youth in a strange and, to me, most delightful country, she faded very soon to a dimly pleasant memory.

It was in 1908, I think, that Grove, the water-colour man, who had always urged

me to return to England, bequeathed me his little white house and studio in St John's Wood. At first the white house seemed likely to be a white elephant; I was doing fairly well in Paris and was quite happy, so I decided to let the place; then it occurred to me that six months in London would be an easy experience, for Grove had left me his furniture with the house, and there was nothing to prevent me from taking over my servant and occupying it at once. I had only been in London for three months when my usual dislike of change seized me once more; I was able to sell my work, and found a number of friends whom I had known in Paris during my student days. So I remained in St John's Wood, and see no probability of ever leaving its tranquil groves.

I am afraid that it was some time before I thought of Maria. Fifteen years, when one is under forty, seems a lifetime, and I had relegated her to the dim army of phantoms who had been the associates of my earliest infancy. When I *did* think of her I decided that she was married—such a pretty, charming, sensible girl would not have escaped—and was doubtless the mother of many

healthy children and the wife of some one more prepossessing than the vanished Walem. The memory of her returned sharply, however, one spring day when I visited a friend in a southern suburb not far from where she had lived, and when I left my friend after luncheon I decided that it would be amusing to try to find Ravensholme once more. Of course Maria would be gone, but Ellen, I felt certain, was eternal, and might have mellowed with age.

When I reached the road where the house had formerly stood I discovered no trace of it or of its shady garden ; the place was a chaos of vile brick and mortar, a sanctuary of nothing but the cheap genteel. The name alone survived dishonourably in a yellow block of flats which was called Ravensholme Mansions, where slatternly young women nursed babies and gossiped on narrow *Art nouveau* balconies. I retreated, thinking how the city merchants who had lived there in old days would groan if they could review the site of their old abode ; their houses were usually pompous and dreary, but at any rate they possessed the instinct of home.

After this melancholy experience Maria

departed once more into the dim limbo of the lost, and I suppose that I was in London for a year without anything occurring to recall her. Then, one wet evening, a face seen for a second in a cab that passed as I stood near a flaring shop-window set me racking my brains for a name to fit it, and at last, after a few futile attempts, the name flashed on me: Mrs Bastable, Maria's mother.

A moment later I was smiling at the absurdity of my idea. Mrs Bastable, if she were alive, would be nearly eighty, and it was most improbable that she would be driving alone about London at night in a cab. The resemblance, however, made me do something which I might have done before,—I looked for the name in a London Directory. I could not find it in the section that is called, so remarkably, the Court Guide, and when I searched in the commercial list I was also disappointed. The firm of Bastable & Company had vanished as definitely as Maria, Ellen, and their mother.

I renounced all hope of finding them, and was greatly astonished, some three months later, to receive a letter from Maria announcing that she was living with Ellen in Bayswater and asking me to call. The letter

was delightful ; Maria still employed the dot-and-dash method, and her manner of writing implied emphatically that she still regarded me as a small boy. I smiled as I thought of the shock that my bearded middle-age would cause her. She, I felt certain, was quite unaltered. But it was strange that she had not married.

III.

The windows of the huge drawing-room were shrouded with long lace curtains, and the light, even on a July afternoon, was grey and cold. When the door opened and a female figure advanced towards me I experienced a deep thrill of surprise, and for a moment was almost certain that, in spite of the absence of the fruit-festooned cap, Mrs Bastable was still in the flesh and had come to receive me. When she spoke, however, the voice was the voice of Maria,—a crisp, high voice, full of sudden emphasis, underlining words, if I may so express it, with a sound not far distant from a squeak. She took my hand and stood looking up at me with very bright eyes ; her lips were set in a

thin line. Then she turned away abruptly. I realised that she was intensely nervous.

“You’ve *grown!*” she said, sinking into a chair and clasping her hands across her knee. I was almost shocked by her smallness; in my memory she had always seemed tall rather than short, and very straight; I found her tiny, with a slight stoop. When she sat down her body seemed instantly to lose all elasticity, to collapse into a tired curve. I noticed also that she was very thin, and that her face was worn, time-beaten. The resemblance to her mother and the lack of resemblance to her former self impressed me continually.

“*You haven’t grown!*” I retorted, rather heavily. “*You’re just—just as you were!*” I regretted the stupid phrase as soon as I had said it, for Maria’s face twitched nervously.

“Oh yes; of course!” she said with an awkward irony that seemed to me pathetic. I realised then that she knew what the years had done with her and was sensitive on the subject. That, somehow, seemed unlike the Maria whom I had known. But after we had talked for some time and I had told her all my history, the original Maria, the Maria who had been moved to ecstasy by Madame

Tussaud and the Crown Jewels, returned ; she displayed an intense and flattering interest in my very mild adventures, and discussed my future with a funny air of regarding herself as the arbitress of my destiny. "You can't ever go back ; I shan't *let* you go !" she announced. "You'll have to regard yourself as one of the family."

I made inquiries about its other members. Her mother, she told me, had died twelve years before, and her brother had retired from business and lived in Scotland with an impossible wife.

"And cousin Ellen ?" I asked. Maria wriggled.

"Oh, Ellen is here," she answered. "She's just the same as ever." Her glance wandered restlessly round the room.

"Still a passionate amateur in sermons ?" I said.

"M'm," responded Maria with a sharp nod. She declined resolutely to expand on the subject of Ellen. I told her of my visit to the dishonoured site of Ravensholme. "We had to leave," she said, "when they built all round us. But I always regret it. Of course this is a very good house, but we see no one. A few of our old friends come sometimes, but

it's very far for them. It sounds funny, but we hardly know a soul in London. Except Mr Letchsky, of course; *he* comes. However, one has got used to it by now."

I looked at the huge, comfortless room, and thought of the gay garden parties of Ravensholme; then I studied Maria's face and decided promptly that she hadn't "got used to it" in the least. She was a person with a genius for friendship, and she had been pining in solitude with Ellen for more than ten years. But why had it happened? She had been young—she was only a little over thirty when her mother died,—she had been pretty, charming, eminently sensible, and not at all clever, and she must have had at least a thousand a-year of her own. The migration from the ancestral suburb had possibly been a mistake, but the advent of the jerry-builder must have forced many of her friends to share it. Had the morose Ellen frightened them all away? The Maria whom I had known would certainly not have allowed that to happen, but this new, tired, crushed Maria—when did she begin to exist?

These thoughts passed through my mind very quickly. My curiosity was keenly aroused, but I resolved to postpone for

the present any attempt to elucidate the mystery.

“Who is Mr Letchsky?” I demanded.

Maria looked at me for a moment before answering, and I imagined I could read in her face that she was speculating whether Mr Letchsky and I would like each other or not.

“Oh! he’s only Paul,” said Maria, as if that explained everything. I pressed for further details, and was informed that his real name was not Letchsky, but he had assumed that romantic title because people thought more of you if you sounded foreign. Subsequently I made out that Mr Letchsky played the piano and was about to embark on a career of the utmost brilliancy. He came round, Maria informed me, two or three times a-week, because his own rooms were too small to contain a grand piano. She had met him at a Charity Concert in the East End. Working in the East End, she added, was her only form of dissipation. I noticed that when she spoke of the mysterious Letchsky she looked at me with a queer kind of defiance.

“You seem to have had a pretty lonely time,” I said.

She smiled rather faintly. “I’ve had a

better time than many people," she answered. "And, after all, one makes one's own life. I chose to come here and live in this way, and it's no use grumbling."

I stared at her.

"You chose!" I echoed. "Then you didn't want to see people?"

She bit her lip and shook her head slowly,—an old habit that I remembered. "No," she said.

"I don't believe it," I cried. "I know the reason, and you're too loyal to tell me."

"What *do* you mean?" she asked.

"I'll tell you," I said. "I know perfectly well why you've been living in this absurd way. It's all that sermon-hunting old kill-joy Ellen!"

I was quite unprepared for the effect of this outburst. Maria sprang up from her chair and confronted me with a set face and clenched hands.

"It isn't, it isn't!" she cried. She began to tremble. "How can you say such things," she added, speaking very rapidly. "You know nothing about us." She stood looking at me for a moment, then gave an extraordinary laugh, exactly like the sound made by a bagatelle ball beginning to settle into

one of the holes on the board. I was dismayed; I had heard that kind of laugh before and knew that it meant hysteria. I managed to smile, however, and to convince her that I was not making any serious accusation against Ellen. I felt more and more bewildered.

"What I said about the house being too far away was nonsense. If people don't come it's because I don't wish them to come," she said after a moment. "It's practically my house; Ellen lets me do whatever I like."

"But why don't you wish them to come?" I asked. She thought for a moment before replying.

"It's dull for them," she said. "There are no men."

"There weren't any at Ravensholme," I retorted. "But you had crowds of people there." She only murmured that while her mother was alive everything had been different. I dropped the subject, announcing that they would in future have at any rate one man to keep them company. "Oh, you may come!" she said, and again I seemed to behold the old Maria.

"I shall!" I said. "I mean to plant myself

upon you and put old Professor Letchsky's nose out of joint."

She laughed. "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't do that!" she said.

She regained her self-control as soon as we dropped the subject of Ellen. For some time she talked of Letchsky and his ambitions and difficulties; then she spoke of her mother, to whom she had been devoted, and of her work in the East End. The fact that impressed me most about her was the way in which she had retained her girlish point of view. There was something infinitely touching in her ignorance of life, in the innumerable manifestations that she gave of an arrested experience. As I watched her I saw that she looked actually old,—older than her years; her hair was abundantly streaked with grey, and there were hard lines at the corners of her lips and eyes; but when she smiled the oddly young sound of her voice and her almost childish simplicity of diction did not seem incongruous.

After another half-hour I rose to go. "I suppose Ellen is at church?" I said as I shook her hand.

She smiled very faintly. "No, she's somewhere about," she answered. "Do you want

to see her?" I intimated that I had a sense of duty, and after we had descended the stairs she knocked at a door on the ground floor. There was no answer; we stood there waiting.

"Do you always have to knock at Ellen's door before you go in?" I asked. "One would think that she composed sermons on her own account." She frowned, and made signs that I was to be silent.

After knocking again she went into the room, leaving me in the hall. I heard a sound of voices in the room, and then she came out and told me to enter it.

Ellen was darning a sock—probably a clerical sock—by a fire which blazed in fierce competition with the July sun. I expected her to greet me with an Euh, but she went to the length of wishing me good afternoon. She hadn't altered noticeably; she was fatter and flabbier, and her eyes were more fishlike; molluses, I suppose, never change much in appearance after they reach maturity. I don't think that she remembered having met me; at any rate, she displayed no emotion. Very soon she relapsed into silence and stared heavily at the buttons on my waistcoat. Maria babbled nervously about nothing in particular, and Ellen took up her sock and

resumed her labour of love. I noticed then that her hands were not very clean, and was suddenly filled with a rage of almost inexplicable intensity. Poor Maria!

The room was stifling, and I left as soon as decency permitted. In the hall Maria stood close to me and looked at me keenly.

“She hasn’t altered, has she?” she asked, I signed an impatient negative. “Not a bit,” I said. “Worse luck!” I did not add my conviction that Ellen was largely responsible for making other people alter, and that I regarded her as the finest specimen of a bloodthirsty old vampire. I went away, promising to dine with them in the following week to meet the mysterious Mr Letchsky, and firmly resolved to contrive that Maria should, at any cost, be rewarded for her dozen years of dulness with a future both happy and eventful. How this was to be managed was a severe problem; the first move, certainly, would have to be a permanent deportation of Ellen to Margate or Cheltenham or the Cannibal Islands.

IV.

I arrived early at the house in Bayswater and found one lonely little figure in the big drawing-room. It belonged to Maria; Ellen, I was informed, had retired to her bed,—a refuge which she invariably sought when Mr Letchsky came to play.

I was trying to fix a date on which Maria could visit the studio when he was announced. Maria left me instantly and made for the door.

“*Here you are!*” she cried. A very tall, thin young man entered the room and replied in rather sepulchral tones that there he was. Then he realised my presence, and stood staring at me with the frankest amazement.

“Why, there’s a real, live man!” he said. Maria gave a shrill laugh, and was apparently far too excited to introduce us to each other. I gave him a smile and a nod, and he gave me a very low bow.

“Well, wonders will never cease!” said Mr Letchsky.

I thought that this insistence on his astonishment at finding another guest in

Maria's house was in very poor taste, but Maria did not seem to mind. She beamed at the young man and began to besiege him with questions about a concert which he intended to give. During this fusillade I had leisure to examine him. He was, I suppose, about twenty-five, but he had an immature, unformed figure which contrasted oddly with his remarkably sagacious face; his nose was large and aquiline, his eyes boldly prominent, and he had a firmly-set jaw. Altogether he gave me the impression of combining a plentiful amount of worldly wisdom with a strongly predatory temperament; his nostrils and lips were almost greedy, but the whole face was redeemed by a remarkably fine forehead. His rather long yellow hair was brushed back, giving him the air of a blend between a seraph and a German professor; his hands were very slender and pale, and when he spoke he waved them slowly in the air as if he was repelling the advances of invisible insects. He was dressed in a threadbare black suit, and wore a large black silk scarf instead of a collar.

He stood in a drooping attitude whilst Maria talked to him, and seemed scarcely to be listening to her, though he smiled at

intervals,—a smile of the lips, not of the eyes. Maria, on the other hand, was radiant; she beamed upon him wonderfully, and waited with rapt eagerness for his rather vague answers. I noticed that she wore a very smart frock and a fine diamond necklace; her hair was neatly dressed, her eyes were bright, and altogether she seemed a different person from the Maria whom I had met in the previous week. She was evidently very intimate with the young musician, and I decided that though I didn't care much for Letchsky's appearance, it was a good thing for her to have an interest in any one. The present interest, by the way, was sufficiently absorbing to make her forget my existence completely for five minutes.

At dinner we drank champagne—it was certain to be bad, Maria asserted, for she herself only drank lemonade, and Ellen was a devotee of barley-water. Bad or good, two or three glasses inspired Letchsky to deliver a monologue on his art. I am a keen, though somewhat ignorant lover of music, and very soon I felt, whilst he talked with a rapidity that made interruption impossible, as if I lay gagged and bound in a temple whilst an energetic young vandal knocked off the heads

of all my favourite gods. If to be modern is to cherish a complete contempt for all things ancient, Mr Letchsky was *hors concours* the child of the hour. He declaimed against all "pattern music"—a compendious phrase which, I presently discovered, included Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and every master of the romantic school except Chopin, whom he regarded (very unjustly, I thought) as a wild impressionist born too soon. Wagner he praised faintly; Tschaikowsky he called a dyspeptic charlatan. His admiration was reserved for the modern French school,—Debussy, Ravel, and a great number of persons whose names I had never heard.

He talked with extreme fluency, with a great deal of the gesture and intonation of the professional lecturer. At that time I had not met many of his particular sect (I have suffered since) and I found him amusing; he was much less amusing, however, than the face of Maria. A saint contemplating of a beatific vision would have been nowhere beside her; she gazed at her young oracle with a melting tenderness, and registered her assent to his monstrous doctrines with a succession of jerky nods. I seemed to remember that in the old days of our friendship Maria

had a hearty dislike of music,—due principally to Ellen's interpretation of Gregorian chants on a vast and villainous pianoforte,—and couldn't have distinguished between a fife and a foghorn; now, however, she had developed under Letchsky's influence, and during a brief pause in the monologue she asserted emphatically that Beethoven was dull and Wagner rather noisy, though she confessed to a liking for *Tannhäuser*. I attempted a defence of my favourite masters, but Letchsky annihilated me instantly. "It can't be argued about," he said. "You either know or you don't know, you feel or don't feel. If you don't feel that nowadays there's a new spirit in life which is missing in all that old stuff you're an antiquary; like all antiquaries, you're dead to your own time." He spoke with calm conviction. I protested; he shook his head, smiled quite kindly, and asked for a second helping of ice-cream. Maria made emphatic signals to the servants.

"He eats *nothing*!" she said to me. "I can't think how he *lives*!" Personally I thought that the way in which Letchsky managed to combine the gratification of a hearty appetite with an incessant flow of eloquence was hardly remote from the

miraculous. Long before he had finished his ice-cream he had launched forth again, proclaiming the fact that we were all on the brink of a great upheaval and dispersion of worn-out institutions, principles, and values ; democracy (which he seemed to confuse with the ultimate results of anarchy) was abolishing crowns, armies, and hereditary honours and wealth ; the flaming torch of revolution was already applied to the mouldering temples of the Conventional and the Academic ; the golden dawn of liberty—liberty in love, in art, in all life — was gigantic in the East. He scorned my humble request that in such an epoch of freedom I might well be allowed to admire Beethoven and not to become a disciple of Gaugin ; all old things — old music, old painting, old poetry—would go, would become completely obsolete, would vanish, simply because they had no message for the new race of men. Of course it was the crudest possible stuff ; but he was mightily eloquent, and probably sincere. I have little faith in the instant and glorious effect of revolutions, but I am prepared to admit that the revolutionary spirit is a necessary adjunct to human progress.

When he had finished the second monologue, Maria gave an ecstatic sigh. "That's just what I think," she said, "only I never can say things." The idea of Maria as a champion of revolution nearly upset my gravity, and I half expected the portrait of the bulky merchant, her father, which hung over the mantelpiece, to come to life and assail us with a volley of early Victorian profanity. In spite of her modest disclaimer, however, Maria did begin to "say things," and I am bound to add that all her remarks were wonderfully inept and irrelevant. Letchsky can hardly have avoided sharing my opinion, but he listened to her with a decent attention which made me like him better. I don't remember all that Maria said; her utterances, I think, were mainly to the effect that the poor had a dreadful time, that the rich lived entirely for pleasure, that married women were slaves and unmarried women had no outlet for their energies; and finally, that the sooner the whole brazen abomination of Society, as it was constituted at present, went into the melting-pot, the better it would be for every one. This, at any rate, was a definite point of view; but when she began to support it

with argumentative detail she lapsed into the wildest and most illogical nonsense. Matched with her theories, those of Letchsky seemed calm and philosophic; she was more Catholic than the Pope. I felt irritated with him for having taught her this trick of pouring out the cheap street-corner jargon of the Socialist; it went so incongruously with my memories of the original Maria, and obviously it excited her far too much; her hands trembled, and she spoke in a shrill staccato. Once, when I ventured to object mildly to some fantastic idea of hers, she snapped at me like a dragon and seemed on the verge of losing control of herself altogether. It was a relief when the servants created a diversion by bringing coffee and cigarettes.

We did not renew the discussion in the drawing - room, for as soon as we reached that unpleasantly palatial apartment Letchsky went to the piano. Maria chose a high chair, and sat on it with her hands clasped, gazing intently at his face; I found a comfortable couch at the other end of the room, and reclined there watching the group that they made. Whatever flaws there might be in Letchsky's theory of music, there were

few in his practice: he played magnificently, with all the masterly sureness and strength of a born pianist. The music was very modern—full of explosive discords and interminable tinklings,—it represented, I think, *jets d'eau* and *poissons d'or* and *frissons d'Avril*—but some of it was fine and most of it was pretty. I noticed that whilst he was playing his face lost its hard lines and assumed a keenly concentrated expression which lent it actual beauty.

He played for more than an hour, with only momentary pauses, and terminated the performance with a wild bacchanalian dance of his own composition. Then he sat for some moments with his forehead resting on the top of the piano. I rose, and sauntered over to Maria. She looked up at me with a startled air as I approached, and I saw then that her bright eyes were blurred with tears.

“Oh dear! I call that beautiful,” she said with a gulp.

I nodded, and after a moment she called to Letchsky, who had apparently fallen asleep. “Mayn’t we have a little more, dear?” she demanded. I was somewhat startled by this intimate mode of address; but Letchsky,

when he looked up, displayed no symptoms of surprise.

"No more to-night," he said emphatically, rising from the piano. "If we do, all the doors will begin to bang." And he grinned widely.

"Now what does he mean by that?" I asked.

Maria frowned.

"Oh! only that when Ellen thinks he has played enough she comes out of her room and opens and shuts all the doors upstairs," she explained.

I made no comment on Ellen's behaviour, but Letchsky tapped his skull. "A dead brain," he explained; "never awakened. But the New Spirit will alter all that. There won't be any more Ellens."

"Well, let us hope that they'll all be Marias," I said.

He looked at Maria, then at me. "I'm not so sure that there will be any Marias either," he said, with another grin.

Maria made funny gestures of mock indignation. "Brute!" she cried in a high treble. Letchsky held out his hand towards her, and she took it in both of her own. "You'll come to-morrow?" she asked eagerly.

He nodded. "Yes, if I can," he answered, looking as if he were slightly bored by her enthusiasm.

She turned to me. "I can't bear it when I think of him going about alone," she explained. "He's always in a dream. It's horrible! I know that he'll go and get minced by a motor omnibus!"

I said that, in my opinion, Mr Letchsky was sufficiently wide-awake—an artless remark which made Letchsky scrutinise me for some moments with all the force of his deep eyes. Then he asked me abruptly where I lived. I gave him my address, and expressed a hope that he would find his way there. He uttered no superfluous thanks.

"Right; I shall," he said. He looked hard at me again, gave me an odd bow, half curt, half formal, and then took up his music and departed, followed by feverish injunctions from Maria about preserving his invaluable person from accident.

When he had gone, Maria stood staring at the fireplace in silence for some time. Then she turned slowly towards me. "I think he likes you," she observed.

I made an ironical inclination.

"Much obliged to him," I said. "I notice

with jealous anguish that you don't worry about whether I like him."

Maria made an absurdly childish grimace. "You do, don't you?" she asked, with an artful note of indifference.

I laughed. "Some one else does, at any rate!" I said.

Maria blushed vividly.

"He's perfect — perfect!" she said in a queer muffled voice.

I strode across the room and inspected a terrible Victorian picture of a child who was trying to feed a large collie with chocolate. It was called *Dear Doggie*. When I turned sadly away from it, Maria was again gazing into the fireplace. I risked a cyclone and spoke my mind.

"He's a brilliant pianist and a very conceited young man," I said. "I don't mind his manners, but I loathe his necktie; and as for his theories, they're as crude as raw garlic."

There was no cyclone; but, instead, a horrible thing happened. Maria burst into tears. Feeling a complete brute, I went to her and began to stammer apologies. She sobbed for a minute, then recovered herself with a mighty effort.

"It's all *right!*" she gasped. "I'm a fool; only I can't bear any one coming here who doesn't like him—who can't appreciate him. It makes me *hate* them!" She came close to me and put her hand on my sleeve. "You will try to like him for my sake, won't you?" she said, blinking up at me. "He has so few friends—he doesn't seem to care about anything but music,—and he's wretchedly poor; only a year or two ago he nearly starved. I suppose," she added with a feeble smile, "you think me very silly—a sentimental old maid? But I can't help it. One must like somebody."

I shook her hand. "I think you're the kindest person in the world," I said with conviction, "and if Mr Letchsky thinks so too, I'm prepared absolutely to adore him."

"That's just about what I *do!*" said the shameless Maria. "Of course," she added vaguely after a moment, "there's no earthly reason why Paul should think anything of that kind about me."

"Not the least in the world," I agreed. "And now, will you kindly explain why your name isn't in the London Directory, or the Red Book, or the telephone book—*enfin*, in any guide to the abodes of the fair

and fashionable? If you hadn't found me, I might have spent my whole life trying to find you."

Maria stared at me. "Surely it's in them all?" she said. Then a thought struck her. "You foolish person!" she cried. "You looked for our name—my name. Of course, the house is taken in Ellen's name. So like a man!"

"In Ellen's name!" I echoed. "But Ellen's name *is* your name."

She stared at me again. "Do you mean to say," she said, "that you never heard of Ellen's marriage?" I was greatly astonished. "Never," I answered. "And you'll find it very difficult," I added irreverently, "to make me believe that anything of the kind ever happened to her."

Maria looked grave.

"It's perfectly true, all the same," she said. "She was married to a man who lived near us—a Mr Winbolt—very soon after mother died. It wasn't a success; I'm afraid that he only wanted her money. They had to separate, and now he is dead. It was a dreadful shock to her—the separation, I mean." She paused for a moment and looked at me very solemnly. "That's why

she is so queer in some ways—partly,” she concluded.

“I see,” I murmured, controlling a strong desire to ask all kinds of questions concerning the late Winbolt. Maria was apparently disposed to offer no further information, and I wished her good-night. As I walked home I became more and more alive to the almost ludicrous irony of the situation,—that Maria, who had been supremely fitted to be a happy wife and mother, should have remained a spinster; whilst Ellen, the impossible Ellen —! I could form no high opinion of Mr Winbolt’s taste, unless, indeed, he also had been an amateur in sermons. That the marriage and its subsequent train of woe had produced any effect on Ellen I did not believe for a moment. She was exactly as she always had been, and all the revolutions and cataclysms so ardently prophesied by Letch-sky would not have had the faintest effect on her.

V.

During the weeks that followed, Maria and I once again went sight-seeing, and effected a visitation of London that recalled the ad-

ventures of our youth, except that the National Gallery and Hertford House were substituted for Madame Tussaud's and the Monument, and that we paid tribute to our own antiquity with an extensive patronage of taxi-cabs. No third person came to mar these expeditions; Ellen, as far as I could observe, never put her nose outside Bayswater—though she had a strong propensity for prowling about the shop windows of that district,— and Letchsky was always busy during the day.

One fact about Maria was very soon obvious to me; she had not lost her former almost omnivorous interest in life and its duly enshrined products. She inspected mummies at the British Museum with the same fervid attention that she bestowed on the latest eccentricity of feminine apparel at the Carlton or the Ritz; she was wildly eager to fly in an aeroplane—an ambition which it was then impossible to gratify; she insisted on being escorted to all kinds of lectures on political economy, where I suffered severely, and to the Strangers' Gallery of the House of Commons, where I suffered even more. It was in the same year, I think, that the more turbulent hordes of female self-emanci-

pators first became uncomfortably active, and for a while Maria was inclined to listen to the song of the sirens; something that happened, however, — was it that they ensnared the Home Secretary's poodle and dyed him with indecent colours? — totally averted her sympathy, and ever after, when they were mentioned, she hoisted her small nose in the air and said that they were silly. She was quite incapable of perceiving that they were really translating into action some of Letchsky's much-admired and oft-repeated theories. Of the Arts, painting seemed to give her most pleasure; she would manage to look at a miraculous number of pictures in an hour, and would remember many of them clearly afterwards; music, I believe, she only endured, except when Letchsky played, though she insisted on attending a great many concerts and operas. We went to the Ring at Covent Garden, dressing at wonderful hours in order not to miss a note of that mighty sequence of drama; but after the end of the *Götterdammerung* she confided to me that though she had enjoyed parts of each performance, she would never have the courage to sit through the whole work again. Letch-

sky, by the way, was ribald concerning this pious orgy.

On several occasions she visited the studio, inspected my work, uttered the funniest criticisms, and met various painter friends. I imagine that they had never in the course of their experience encountered any one remotely resembling her, but they liked her; no one except a pedantic fool could help liking Maria; her *naïveté* was sublime and wholly lovable. She had a conviction—and perhaps there is much to be said for it—that specialists ought always to be “drawn out” on their own subject, and her invariable method of attaining this result with artists was to air some highly metaphysical theory of the meaning of Art which she had learnt from Letchsky. The effect of this treatment on certain solid, stolid practical painters was always worth watching.

Letchsky, as I said, seldom appeared during the day; but it is no over-statement to assert that he was with us continually in spirit. She was always thinking of him; when we went shopping—she was a vague but ardent shopper—she would see some object—a kettle, a rug, a hot-water bottle—which would, she imagined, be useful to him, and she would promptly

send it off to his rooms. She had a theory that he was very delicate—a theory which I did not share—and if Letchsky had dutifully swallowed all the meat lozenges, cough cures, and quintessences of beef which she despatched to his address whenever she entered a chemist's shop, he would either have died or have accumulated more vitality than Herakles. She talked of him continuously, always with the eager thrill in her voice, telling me of his future triumphs and past hardships over and over again in exactly the same phrases.

Letchsky came to visit me at St John's Wood about a fortnight after I had first met him. I liked him better during the first half-hour of this occasion ; he inspected my pictures carefully, and told some amusing and malicious stories about a gang of sentimental-religious painters that he had known in Germany. He didn't trouble to conceal from me that he thought my work old-fashioned, but he seemed to find indications that I was progressing towards a state of grace, and actually praised one or two of the unfinished portraits. When he had finished his tour of inspection, he flung himself at full length on my old sofa, and sang a pæan to Picasso, whom he admired fervently.

I interrupted the pæan by asking him if he had seen Maria. He looked at me for a moment. "Oh yes! I'm always seeing her," he answered. He placed his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling for some moments, then abruptly he raised his long serpentine body from the sofa, and sat bolt upright, regarding me with very keen eyes.

"Have you known her very long?" he asked. I told him of my ancient devotion to Maria. "You're a relation, aren't you?" was his next demand. Soon afterwards he had another question for me. "Does she tell you all about herself?"

I didn't understand what this purported. "Oh, I suppose so," I answered, "more or less. I seem to be the only old friend that she possesses." Letchsky continued to stare at me with his strange black eyes. "And she tells you all about me?" he said. I smiled.

"Certainly she talks about you," I answered. "I know all your past history and I know that you are going to be immensely famous." He waved his hands irritably. "I don't mean that!" he said. "Does she tell you all about me *now*?" I stared at him, and in some way my puzzled air seemed to

answer his question. He resumed his former attitude of repose.

“She’s an odd little thing,” he remarked airily.

“She’s the kindest person on earth,” I affirmed with extreme gruffness. “And any one who becomes a friend of hers may think himself extremely lucky.”

“Ah! a friend?” said the strange young man. “Now our relations,—my relations with her can scarcely be called a friendship. I like her, of course; she’s a most amusing study and as impressionable as wax, but I’d no more think of trusting her, of confiding in her, than of pouring my inmost secrets into a telephone. She’s far too *bavarde*; but of course she becomes deeply offended if she imagines that I don’t confide everything to her. So I’ve pretended to do it, and I’m afraid the result has been rather awkward.”

“What result?” I asked curtly. He waved a lean hand in the air.

“She’s in love with me,” he said. “It’s not exactly a result, but it comes very largely from my having let her assume the existence of an intimacy between us which isn’t really there.”

"That is a very beautiful sentence," I said, "and like a great many beautiful sentences, has nothing whatever to do with the truth. She isn't in love with you; she loves you like a mother, that's all, and the way you talk about her makes me sincerely regret her waste of affection."

Letchsky looked at me with a calm smile.

"She's in love with me," he repeated. "Please don't imagine," he went on, "that I'm so archaic or idiotic as to be boasting. That kind of vanity has died out, I should think, by now. But when one knows a thing for a fact—an awkward fact,—it's ludicrous to turn from it with a blush, and say, 'she cannot love so base a soul as mine,' or some Tennysonian rot of that kind. Isn't it better to look at it from the modern point of view,—to recognise that her life has been warped and stunted, that she has reached *l'age dangereux*, that she's suffering from congenital or acquired hysteria, and that I was the first man she had met for years?"

His air of god-like aloofness and his calm voice irritated me intensely. "It may be better to look at it like that," I said, "but I see no excuse for talking about it."

He stared at me with patient wonder.

"Why?" he asked. "Do you mean," he continued after a moment, "that you really believe in reticence—in tactful disregard of anything that is likely to make any one uncomfortable? If you do I disagree with you absolutely; I believe that things were made to be talked about; that all reticence is essentially morbid. And a thing that is obvious to every one!"

I mingled several quite incongruous paints on a palette. "It wasn't obvious to me," I said rather feebly. I was beginning to be torn between a sense that our conversation was entirely improper and a desire to hear him ascending to further heights of the fatuous. Letchsky grinned. "You must be painfully—inattentive," he said, "for it's obvious even to old Ellen—to Mrs Winbolt. She actually took the trouble to send for me and to tell me that there was no hope of Maria ever marrying, because she was entirely wrapped up in her East End work. I hadn't the remotest wish to marry Maria, but I made Ellen think that I had, and she worked herself up into an extraordinary state; she behaved exactly as if she were drunk. I've shocked you again, I see."

"I think you're talking perfect nonsense," I said.

"Call it what you like," said Letchsky. "If you think it nonsense you're convicted as grossly unobservant." He lit a cigarette, leant back on the sofa, and blew the smoke high in the air. After a while he asked me suddenly if I had to live by my painting. I replied that I did, and was quite prepared to hear him demand exact particulars of my income. He spared me, however. "I live by my music," he said. "The year before last I made forty pounds; last year I made fifty; this year, so far, I've made thirty-eight pounds fourteen shillings and four-pence. England doesn't exactly lavish her billions on the budding genius, does she?"

I suggested that he ought to give lessons, and he replied that he would prefer to starve. "It won't last; money will come," he said. "But until it comes, I feel that I have a perfect right even to pick pockets, to commit highway robbery. The world seems at present to be damnably in my debt. My fondest dream is to catch a swollen financier, a rich Jew, an African diamond merchant, and to squeeze him to bankruptcy. Don't you believe that an artist who does good work

and can't make enough to live on is justified in taking money wherever he finds it?"

I replied that this theory doubtless enjoyed the support of various eminent burglars. By this time I was thoroughly weary of Letchsky and his confidences; his remarks about Maria seemed to me, when I recovered from the first shock of surprise, coldly impudent, and I had an uncomfortable feeling that he was saying all manner of absurdities mainly with the purpose of annoying me. I managed, however, to keep my temper.

"I don't know how on earth you live," I said. "You must contrive to earn a little more money."

He made a magnificent gesture.

"Oh! when one is absorbed by one's art," he said, "one can get along with bread and water. But I *am* a little tired of it."

At any other time, I believe, I would have tried to make him accept a loan, but at that particular moment I felt far from benevolent. Apparently, however, he had no design of that kind—if he had wanted money at once I am certain that he would have no scruples about asking for it—and after he had smoked in silence for five minutes, whilst I painted

wildly and atrociously, he rose from the sofa and took up his broad-brimmed hat.

"I suppose I shall have to marry money," he remarked meditatively. Then he looked at me with his queer smile. "I wonder what Maria will do when I marry!"

"She'll be as devoted to your wife as she is to you," I retorted. "You appear to me to have very little perception into the minds of people who are really fine."

He did not seem in the least offended, but continued to smile.

"It'll make an awful difference," he said. He laughed suddenly, and came towards me. "It's funny, but I feel a kind of responsibility about Maria," he explained. "As a rule, people don't matter to me in the least."

"I'm glad you've some glimmerings of gratitude," I growled. He looked at me very intently. "Gratitude?" he said, with a note of slight surprise. "Isn't that rather a big word? Our friendship—if you like to call it that—was an affair of mutual give-and-take, like all friendships. I can't feel that I'm under any kind of obligation."

"Then you ought to," I said. "She has devoted herself to you absurdly."

He was silent for a moment, still look-

ing at me. Then he gave me a brilliant smile.

“Ah, you mean the hot-water bottles!” he cried. And with this final insolence he departed. Afterwards I decided that he was the most offensive person that I had ever met, but long meditation failed to show me why he had chosen a comparative stranger as the recipient of confidences which should have been intimate. Was he merely an ill-bred cub, or was he a thoroughly malicious student of human nature who had discovered the best method of irritating me? Of course, he was right about Maria; she was completely in love with him; but that he should have no feeling for the necessity of decent reticence was really disgusting.

VI.

I did not see him again until after my summer holiday in North Italy, though I dined with Maria twice a-week during the latter part of July and the first half of August. Though I had decided to dislike him, I found myself regretting that he did

not come to dinner, since his absence meant the presence of Ellen, who was the worst of all wet blankets. She scarcely spoke, and always avoided my eye; but she had a trick of watching Maria with a craftily stupid expression that both puzzled and irritated me; sometimes, too, when Maria was excited and pitched her voice higher and higher, Ellen would suddenly begin to imitate her,—a performance which would have been ludicrous to the last degree if it hadn't been, somehow, extremely sinister. When Maria mentioned Letchsky, Ellen invariably snorted like a savage pig. It was not difficult to see that her snorts infuriated Maria, who, however, contrived as a rule to suppress her anger; on one occasion it flashed out, not altogether to my sorrow, instantly reducing Ellen to a maudlin and tear-sodden pulp which was removed by the stalwart parlour-maid. Subsequently Maria showed such alarming symptoms of nervous exhaustion that I felt reluctant to leave her alone in the grim and silent house.

After this outburst she never mentioned her *protégé* when Ellen was present; I noticed, too, that she was less inclined than of old to sing his glories when I was alone with her.

He was staying, I learned, with some people to whom Maria darkly alluded as "his grand friends," and of whom it was not difficult to perceive she was wildly jealous, though she reiterated, when she hinted that Letchsky was living amid a blaze of coronets, brilliant conversation, and feminine splendour, that it was all "so good for Paul." He loved luxury, poor boy, and had never enjoyed a glimpse of it since his family lost all their money; he had a passion for riding which he was at last able to indulge without merely hiring horses from a livery stable.

My face must have astonished her. "Do you really mean to tell me he did that—rode in London?" I asked.

Maria drew in her lower lip and nodded slowly.

"Of course he had to have exercise," she said. I was about to retort that persons with incomes under a hundred a-year were usually compelled to rely for exercise on their own legs, when she added, "So nice! He made fifty pounds the night before last. He wrote to tell me about it."

"Did he give a concert to all his countesses and send round the collection plate?" I asked. Maria frowned.

"I think you're rather silly," she said. "He doesn't do music for money. He made it at Bridge." She looked at me with challenging eyes, and was too evidently prepared to resent any criticism of Letchsky's pleasures. I contented myself with saying, "Oh, indeed!" and decided privately that Letchsky had either lied to me about his income for some unknown reason or that he was well on the way to perdition. The sojourn at the house of his "grand friends" would probably end in his borrowing the fare back to London from their butler.

"If he cultivates such expensive tastes the only thing for him to do will be to marry one of the countesses," I said. Maria looked at me quickly, then turned away.

"You know, Arthur," she said, after a moment, "I should *hate* it if he were to marry." She gave one of her funny gasps. "Oh dear! I suppose I'm a fool," she added. "Tell me all about your new picture."

It was very soon after this new ray had been shed on the character of Letchsky that I departed for the Val Camonica. I did not return to England until October, when I was disgusted to find that Maria's holiday had consisted of three weeks with Ellen in some dull hydropathic in Yorkshire. Ellen, it ap-

peared, imagined herself to be encompassed with all kinds of physical and spiritual perils as soon as she emerged from the fastnesses of Bayswater. I scolded Maria, and informed her that she ought to find a companion for Ellen ; she retorted, with more bitterness of accent than I had ever heard her employ, that no one in their senses would dream of retaining that position for more than forty-eight hours. When I inquired about Letchsky she flushed, and said that she had seen very little of him, —that he had been in the country. I thought that she looked intensely tired.

A few days later an event happened which I shall always regard as the great surprise of my life. I was working in my studio one afternoon when my French servant came to announce that a lady, whose name seemed to be Vimple, desired to see me. I directed that she should be shown in, and to my immense astonishment, the ample and unpleasing Ellen appeared in the doorway, and after favouring me with the brief smirk that was her invariable form of greeting, waddled towards a chair. She wore a voluminous garment of rusty black silk with, apparently, as many petticoats as an old-fashioned pen-wiper ; on her head was a much - beflowered bonnet

which was, I decided, an heirloom descended from the late Mrs Bastable, and her hands were protected by seedy black cotton gloves that were several sizes too large. Altogether, with her grey flabby face, which always gave me the impression that if she held her breath it would expand into some monstrous pantomime mask, and the strange combination of vastness and limpness which it was polite to call her figure, she was a remarkable object,—not venerable, but in some shocking way almost antediluvian.

She seemed quite indifferent to her surroundings. She never looked at my pictures; she didn't look, for a long time, even at me, but she stared at her own stubby feet and dug pits in the carpet with her umbrella, which she had insisted on retaining. When I assailed her with the usual commonplaces about the weather, her health, and Maria, she did not answer, but continued solemnly to prod the carpet. After a few minutes spent in watching her so employed, I was visited with an almost overpowering desire to assert as my opinion that all sermons were wiles of the Devil, and to offer her a brandy and soda and a cigar; I managed, however, to restrain myself, and to remark in a loud voice that

it was very good of her to come and see me.

Ellen wriggled faintly—if such a verb can be applied to the movements of a body usually so heavily inert. Then, for the first time, she looked up at me. Her lips moved without sound for a moment, but ultimately she spoke.

“There’s a reason,” she murmured.

I had a thrill of foreboding. “There’s nothing wrong with Maria?” I asked.

The pantomime mask moved slowly forward, then retreated a little way. “That’s it,” she murmured. “That’s it. Maria.” The voice was thick and indistinct; I drew up a chair. “She isn’t ill?” I demanded. Ellen did not seem to hear me.

“Something wrong with Maria,” she repeated as if she were reciting a lesson. Her eyelids drooped; she opened and closed her fat hands.

When I spoke I was startled to find myself shouting. “What is it?” I cried. Ellen made a nervous movement, looked at me, then produced a dusky handkerchief and blew her nose carefully.

“She’s not behaved properly.” The words seemed to ooze very slowly from her. I felt

a great relief mingled with an equal irritation. Why on earth had the old monster chosen me as the repository of her imaginary grievances?

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said. “She has behaved far too properly all her life. She’s lived absolutely for others. I hope to see her break loose before she’s too old, and fling her bonnet over every mill that she can find. She’s been starved and asphyxiated; any doctor would tell you that what she wants is a long course of joy, peaches, champagne, Italian sun, lovers, babies, and Paris frocks. She looks as tired as a nun at the end of Lent. I believe you’ve been reading her all your sermons.”

This singular outburst had no effect on Ellen. She continued to excavate my carpet. After a while she opened her mouth again.

“What I say is,” she observed, “it’s my money as well as hers, and she hadn’t any right. Thinks she’s the head of the family, and she’s not. That’s what I say.” She looked up at me, and suddenly the pantomime mask became alive—alive with an expression of terror. The mouth wavered loosely, then spoke.

“We’ll go beggared to our graves,” it said with an indescribable emphasis.

I began to feel then that something was really wrong. I urged her to be more explicit, but she seemed about to lapse into her usual torpor.

"Beggared to our graves," she repeated, but this time the words only seemed to soothe her pleasantly. I spoke loudly and sternly.

"Pull yourself together," I said. She looked up at me with a heavy air of wonder, as if I had suggested her performing some impossible gymnastic feat. "Pull yourself together," I repeated, trying not to laugh, "and tell me what is the matter. I suppose you came here for my advice."

Her face was illuminated with a sudden crafty smile.

"I'll have *legal* advice," she said. "I'll go to the lawyers. What I say is that it isn't right, it isn't honest, to treat an invalid like that. Just because I trusted her. Never trust any one, I always said; never trust a living soul or they'll make you pay for it. *I've paid!*" She uttered the last two words with absolute ferocity.

"Whom do you mean by her? Maria?" I asked. She nodded like a china figure.

"Yes," she said. "Maria. Clever little Maria, who was always telling me what I

ought not to do, and giving herself airs. Pah! And never went to church even on Sunday mornings since mother died. What *I* say—" I cut her short. "For heaven's sake let me hear what this grievance is!" I cried.

Ellen's emotions seemed to succeed each other with miraculous rapidity. She stared at me for a moment and then began to whimper.

" You've no right to speak to me like that!" she said. " I'll go ; I'll go away ! I'll go to the lawyers. I oughtn't to have come. I knew you'd take her side." And she mopped her eyes with the dusky handkerchief.

" I'm very sorry," I said, " if I annoyed you, but do try to explain to me exactly what *is* her side, and what *is* yours. I'm completely in the dark at present, and I'm rather tired of being there."

My apology seemed to appease the facile Ellen. She blew her nose once more, then drew herself up in her chair and said, in a low voice full of religious horror, " That young man is getting all our money."

She looked at me steadily, and in her blurred features I observed the dawn of a strange complacent expression. Did she for

the first time in her life feel that she was saying something significant, something of tremendous importance? The expression grew and grew, in exact proportion, I suppose, to my own air of astonishment.

“Whom do you mean?” I asked.

“Oh, you know!” retorted Ellen, in exactly the same tone that a person of inferior social standing would have employed in saying, “Go hon!” “There’s only one young man that it could be,” continued Ellen, “even if I hadn’t seen the cheques. The very first time I saw him, what I said was that he wasn’t a gentleman. No gentleman would dress like that or play the piano like that. And now we see who’s right!” she trumpeted triumphantly.

“You mean Mr Letchsky,” I said. “Has Maria been lending him money?”

“Lending!” echoed Ellen. She had now become completely articulate, and was rapidly tending towards eloquence. “She’s known him for two years and he’s had hundreds, hundreds, and pianos, and pins for his ties, and rings for his fingers, and fur coats, and seats at the opera all through the summer. She paid for him to go to Germany for six months and have the best lessons he could find—the cheque for that was three hundred,

and she was always sending him ten-pound notes ; I'm certain of that, because they were always about in her desk, and what'd she want ten-pound notes for except to send them to him ? And I say it isn't right, it isn't *decent*!"

"It's thoroughly decent," I answered, "of Maria ; though Mr Letchsky's behaviour is a different matter. Still, after all, Mr Letchsky is a very brilliant musician,—lots of people would call him a genius,—why shouldn't Maria have the pleasure of helping him at the beginning of what will be, I'm certain, a remarkable career ? It's a very obvious form for her kindness to take."

"Euh !" said Ellen. Her face quivered ; she moved her hands with a gesture of despair. "She's helping him with my money," she wailed.

I treated this assertion with scorn, pointing out that Maria was quite rich enough to finance half a dozen struggling musicians without putting an undue strain on her resources.

Ellen ignored my protestations. "It's my money," she reiterated. "I said to myself all along that there was something queer going on, and I knew that Maria was quite

silly—off her head—about that young man. Then the other day she left a letter on the breakfast table from her bank to say that her account was overdrawn. ‘Oh ho, Miss !’ I said, and that afternoon I went to her desk and had a look at her bank-book.”

“I congratulate you !” I said. “ You really become more interesting every moment.”

“Oh, the desk wasn’t locked,” remarked Ellen sublimely. “And it was just as I thought. Her account *was* overdrawn—several hundred pounds.”

“Well, that’s her own affair,” I said gruffly.

“I beg your pardon,” retorted Ellen. “It’s *my* affair ; that’s what *I* say. She’s spent all her own money and now she’s spending mine. It’s all paid into another bank in her name ; we began to do that a long time ago when I had a very serious illness, and we’ve gone on ever since because it was convenient. She paid me out what I wanted and took a certain amount for the house, and then she invested all the rest at the end of the year. It saved me trouble. I found her other bank-book—the one for my money—and I saw as soon as I looked at it that she’d drawn out a lot extra ever since about a year ago. It’s down-right robbery, *I* say, and it’s my belief that

she's not merely giving away money that she's no right to, but she's actually investing capital to keep that young man in luxury all his days. He's had hundreds and hundreds! But I'll put a stop to it; I'll see the lawyers; I'll take my lady to court!" She paused, panting.

I insisted that there was no legal question involved; that she had made over her money to Maria to be used as Maria pleased. I was really convinced that the whole affair was the product of Ellen's distorted imagination, but when I hinted this she became extremely angry and threatened to depart immediately to her lawyer, therefore it seemed wiser to meet her, so to speak, on her own visionary ground. That Maria was financing Letchsky I had already suspected, but that Maria had done so with Ellen's superfluous wealth I found impossible to believe. I looked upon Ellen, I'm afraid, with a pharisaical eye; it was disgusting that she should have conceived these suspicions, and more than disgusting that she should have read Maria's letters and pried into her desk. Meanwhile, Ellen, now fairly launched on the rapid waters of rhetoric, held forth on the bitterness of her lot; laying great stress on the fact that she

was a married woman and the elder of Maria, who had always treated her as if she were a child or an imbecile since the death of Mrs Bastable, snubbing her, spying on her, *et patati patata*. I hardly listened to her, yet I was filled with an aching sense of depression as I realised that this was the kind of thing which poor Maria had been obliged to endure for a dozen years. It was not wonderful that she had fled for refuge to the artificial paradise of sentimentalism.

One fact was obvious—Ellen was sincerely convinced that she had been wronged; this was the single clear idea in her poor muddled brain; and she was at present in a thoroughly venomous condition. “I feel as if I could kill her!” was a choice sample of her remarks. I managed to persuade her that to pour out her absurd story to a lawyer would be singularly futile, and to extract a half-promise from her that she would say nothing to Maria or to any one else—I had a horrid suspicion that she might confide in the servants—until she had seen me again.

She became calm at last, and allowed me to give her some tea. A moment before she departed in a cab she said to me, almost imperiously, “You must make her repay

every penny of it!" Evidently she regarded me as an ally in the imminent conflict with Maria. I exhorted her once again to keep her suspicions to herself, and she drove away with an air which told me plainly that at last she was able to regard herself as completely mistress of a situation.

When she had gone I sat down to consider the affair. Of course, I thought it was all ridiculous—the mere hallucination of a weak-witted old woman,—yet when I recalled Ellen's fiercely vindictive expression I could not avoid the fear that she might create some stupid scandal, and for a moment I had the impulse to telephone a warning to Maria. Reflection, however, soon showed that this would be a foolish act; Ellen might be able to convince the more credulous of her clerical friends that her story was true; but her lawyer, knowing Maria, would be sceptical, and there was always the hope that if she held her tongue, as she had half promised to do, for a little while, the whole affair would become lost in the darkness of her befogged brain. There was no point in troubling Maria unless Ellen became actively venomous. That Ellen should have taken the trouble to come to

St John's Wood with the object of enlisting me as her champion, and now regarded that object as successfully accomplished, was an amusing corollary to her fantastic theorem. I felt mildly sorry for her; her woeful imagination had evidently caused her some real suffering; but I was firmly determined that she should not annoy her sister. For Maria to be accused as a thief by the person for whose sake she had cut herself off from the gay world and endured twelve years' interment in Bayswater, would really snap the last sound fibres of an already overstrained temperament. I decided, finally, to say nothing to Maria about Ellen's wonderful visit. Ellen, I thought, would not divulge it; the novel delight of being engaged in a conspiracy against her sister and of doing things on her own account would probably suffice to keep her quiet.

It was with a distinct thrill of apprehension, therefore, that I recognised the accents of Maria in an ear-splitting blast which issued from the telephone late on the same evening (Maria's treatment of the telephone always suggested the methods of a trombone player in the prelude to the third act of *Lohengrin*), demanding an interview with

me at ten o'clock next morning. I agreed to the arrangement, and asked if anything was wrong. Maria shouted "What?" three or four times, and then, after she had apparently heard my question, was silent. A moment later she cried, "See that there's no one with you when I come. Good-night," and I heard her replace the receiver with a bang. I went to bed, dismally fearful that Ellen had lost her temper and hurled her infamous accusations at Maria's head when they met at dinner. Yet, perhaps a violent climax of this kind might be a blessing in travesty; Maria would realise that it would be impossible to live in an atmosphere of perpetual suspicion; she would break free at last, and some unfortunate lady of mature years would be dedicated, or rather doomed, to the companionship of Ellen. Anything, even a violent and public squabble, would be preferable to a further term of that self-imposed servitude.

VII.

Next morning Maria arrived half an hour before the appointed time. I saw at once that she was agitated; she dropped all her

money when she was trying to pay the cabman, and she tripped and almost fell as she was ascending the few steps that led to my front door. We went into the studio, and then she relinquished her parasol and sank into an arm-chair. I asked her at once if anything was wrong.

She did not answer, but peered about the studio, with the queer bird-like movement of her head that I knew so well. At last she turned a pair of feverishly bright eyes towards me, gave a nervous laugh, and observed, "It really is *rather* funny!"

I inquired what particular event seemed to her an occasion for mirth. She rose, went quickly across the studio and looked at a sketch which she had seen a dozen times, then turned and came slowly up to me.

"Didn't *you* think it funny?" she asked. The smile that was on her lips died suddenly; she looked up at me with the air of a solemn child.

"You mean——?" I said. She nodded slowly.

"Her coming here," she answered. "Oh dear! One would never have thought——. She really is a queer old thing." She bit her lower lip and sat down again. I was

still uncertain if she knew the reason of Ellen's visit.

"She was quite brilliant yesterday," I said. "She fairly gushed with eloquence. I feel now that I was always unjust to her; I never knew her before, and I never suspected that she possessed an imagination."

Maria looked slightly puzzled, but spoke with conviction. "Oh, she's no imagination whatever," she said. She smiled again. "I wish I could have seen you when she came in!" she cried suddenly. I replied that during that poignant moment my behaviour had been irreproachable.

"Rather amusing," said Maria. "*Rather* amusing! And she really came to try to set you against me! When silly people become cunning they do choose such odd ways, don't they?"

"How did you know that she had come?" I asked.

"Oh, she let it all out after dinner," answered Maria. She paused for a moment, then added, "She always lets everything out sooner or later. She's worse in that way even than I am."

I hesitated for a moment. "Then you

know," I said at length, "why she came—that she has some imaginary grievance?"

"Didn't you just hear me say that she had no imagination?" cried Maria. "Her grievance is genuine, in its way. You know she always hated Paul and was horribly rude to him."

"So she told you what she said to me?" I demanded. Maria shook her head slowly, peering at me from under the brim of her enormous hat.

"No," she said. "She flew into a dreadful rage. . . . I couldn't hear half that she said. But she told me that she had seen you, and seemed to imagine that you took her side."

"Of course you knew I didn't," I responded. "I knew she was under some absurd delusion; but I wanted to keep her quiet."

Maria looked scornful.

"You needn't bother about that," she said. "Haven't I a perfect right to do what I like with my own money? I suppose you think that I've been very silly about Paul, but I don't care; I *had* to do it; and for once I was able to give things away to some one who didn't feel any sense of being under an obligation—of having to pay me back somehow."

I smiled rather sourly as I remembered Letchsky's remarks on the nature of obligation. "You were perfectly in the right," I said, "but I think you gave him rather too much. I don't know that it was altogether good for him."

"You mean, I suppose," snapped Maria, "that I oughtn't to have sent him money when he lost at cards. I don't care a bit; to me it was just a case of a person whom I—liked—being in trouble and of my being able to help him out. I didn't stop to think of consequences. And when all's said and done the only consequences 'll be that he'll be famous all over the world, and that I shall be able to remember that I was some use to him. I'm furious that you and Ellen know about it, but now that you *do* know it'll go on just the same. I've quite enough money for both of us."

She was trembling with excitement. I went to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Do whatever you like, my dear Maria," I said, "but don't forget to keep an eye on old Ellen."

She stared at me. "Why, I always keep an eye——" she began. She paused; then,

still staring, she exclaimed, "I wonder how Ellen knew! It's really extraordinary; generally she notices nothing, and she never saw Paul; she always went to bed when he came. There was no one who could tell her; the servants might have known that I sent him things, but they wouldn't talk to her about it. I suppose she just guessed. It was really rather clever of her."

"Ellen's a miser at heart, probably," I suggested, "and misers can smell money, and detect its absence by the use of the same process. All the same, I'm going to give you a hint which you will probably think very impertinent. Keep your desk locked, and don't leave letters about."

Maria uttered a sharp cry. "Oh! What do you mean?" she gasped.

I suppose that I was guilty of treachery towards Ellen, but the thought of all that Maria had been obliged to endure was strong upon me, and the pious hope that this final revelation might result in a definite split between the sisters made me fling aside discretion.

"She read your letter from your bank," I said, "and then she got hold of your passbooks. And—" I did not finish the sen-

tence. An amazing change was happening in Maria's face.

"My pass-books!" she cried very quickly; "do you mean to say that Ellen took them out of my desk,—Ellen—the Christian Ellen?" She said the last words with a scorn that was melodramatic, and at any other time I should have been unable to resist smiling. At that moment, however, her expression really frightened me; her face was extraordinarily contorted; she looked as if she were on the verge of hysteria, and I loathe hysteria. "It's no use being angry," I said. "Ellen's not quite like other people. Her brain is sick with a surfeit of sermons. What you ought to do is to decide calmly and finally that it's impossible to go on living with her; you must find some comfortable kind of asylum for Pious Prowlers and Suspicious Sniffers, and you must keep her in luxury there till she dies. Probably she will outlive you; her heart's as dry as summer dust."

Maria gave no attention to this eloquent appeal. Evidently she was still astonished at my unmasking of Ellen. After some time spent in staring at the carpet she looked up at me. "Did she say anything to you about the pass-books?" she asked.

“She said a large quantity of frantic nonsense,” I answered after a moment. “I don’t imagine that figures are exactly Ellen’s *forte*. She has got an absurd idea—I may as well tell you everything now that I’ve begun,—she has an absurd idea that you have spent all your own money, and are using hers for the benefit of Letchsky. She’ll continue to think so—I know my Ellen—and the situation will be quite intolerable. I’ve a ‘Times’ in the other room; we’ll hunt up a luxurious asylum for her at once.”

Maria contemplated me with very solemn eyes.

“Do you really think that it was such an absurd idea?” she asked slowly.

To say that I was startled would be a feeble account of my sensations. I gazed at Maria with wild wonder, and I think I demanded what on earth she meant. Maria’s eyes wavered no more; she looked at me with unusual steadiness.

“The funny thing is that it happens to be true,” she said.

I made a violent effort. “My dear Maria!” I cried, “don’t, please, poke fun at a poor stupid man like that. It makes my flesh

creep. Be a sweet kind lady, and say it's all a joke."

Maria looked almost scornful. "Don't be silly," she said. "You know I never make jokes. It's quite true that when I found I hadn't enough money, I took Ellen's—income, of course, not capital. I suppose I shall pay her back on quarter-day if I can, but I really don't know if I shall be able to, and I really don't care if I can't. You may well look shocked; I'm a burglar, I suppose; an embezzler, don't you call it? morally if not legally; and I don't mind a bit. The one thing that annoys me is Ellen finding out." She paused, looking the image of defiance, and was obviously as unrepentant as she declared. Indeed, I regret to have to chronicle that during her extraordinary confession she suddenly acquired all the air of a heroine; her face glowed, her eyes flashed, and she looked wonderfully dignified.

"Of course," I said feebly, "the money was paid to you for you to do as you liked with it."

"I should have done just the same if it hadn't been," declared Maria vehemently. "I should have got at it somehow." I at-

tempted to hint my disbelief in this lawless assertion, and then she flamed out at me like a lamp that had been shaken. "I would, I *would!*" she cried. "What can Ellen do with money? Nothing; the little she draws for herself she throws into—she fritters away. The rest has gone on accumulating for years, and it will all be mine when she dies. It's no use to her; but to Paul it means life and health and beautiful things; he's an artist, a poet, a genius; he wants the whole world, and I'd give it him if I could, and care about as much for what the other people said and thought as I care for Ellen's wallowing and wailing over her pass-book. Ellen has never done anything in her life," she continued, her voice rising, "that anybody with the wildest imagination could call useful; she's been nothing but a burden—a burden and a *scourge!*" She fairly flung the last word at me, and I believe that I stepped backwards as if it were an actual missile.

"My dear Maria!" I began.

Maria regained some of her self-control. "Oh, well, I'm sorry I said that," she went on in a quieter voice; "it's very shocking, I suppose, but it's true, quite true, as perhaps you'll know some day. Are you really horri-

fied," she asked, with a faint smile, "to find I'm a genuine burglar? It's funny; when I came here and thought that you might have guessed *something* was queer, I felt quite upset; and when you spoke about the pass-books I thought I should faint; but now that you know everything I don't care a bit. We're a nice family, aren't we? — Ellen prowling round Maria's desk, and Maria embezzling Ellen's money. Paul would say that we were the regular result of Victoria and Suburbia. He often said that—in fun; but I usen't to be quite sure what he meant." She laughed, rather hysterically. "Well, won't you ever speak to me again?" she demanded. "Do you think I'm really *very* wicked?"

I was far too bewildered to attempt to answer this difficult question. I believe that I displayed a thoroughly craven spirit, imploring her to repay Ellen at once, and to stop her from going to a solicitor by any kind of wile. Maria heard me with calm indifference.

"She may do whatever she likes," she remarked. "And I shall go on making the best use of her money that it could possibly be put to. And really, in a way, she owes it to me; often I didn't touch a penny of

hers for months, and ran the house and everything by myself. She owes it to the world, too; none of the clergymen at the churches that she goes to could ever get a brass farthing out of her. I consider," added Maria finally and triumphantly, "I consider that I'm only performing an act of common justice, and I mean to go on!"

"Well, it's your affair," I said at length. "But don't forget the possibility of Ellen going to some wicked attorney and brewing trouble. I don't imagine that she's a very accurate person, and she has a grievance, or thinks she has. Even though she can't hurt you legally, she may cause you no end of bother."

Maria shook her head with great decision.

"She won't really do anything," she said. "She knows that if she did I should refuse to live with her any longer, and that wouldn't suit her at all. She won't be very pleasant for the next month or so, but after that she'll begin to realise that if I mean her to help Paul with her money she'll have to do it. What else *could* she do with it?"

"Perhaps she wants to leave it all to charities," I suggested.

Maria sniffed scornfully.

"That's very likely!" she remarked. "And anyhow, duty comes before charity. When two old maids find a man of genius whom they can help, they're absolutely bound to do everything they can for him."

"Yes, but poor old Ellen didn't find him," I protested weakly.

"Never mind! I saved her the trouble," retorted Maria.

"And you really mean to go on living with her?" I asked.

Maria nodded. "Yes," she answered. A humorous light began to shine in her eyes; she looked at me with a really wicked smile.

"If I don't, you see," she explained, "perhaps I shouldn't be able to get at her money. No, I shan't desert your poor old Ellen. I read in a book the other day about the way ants keep some other insect—aphises aren't they called?—in their homes. That's exactly our case. I'm the ant and Ellen's the aphis."

She was now—or seemed—completely at her ease. I waved a threatening forefinger towards her.

"Don't you try to take me in," I said, "with your ants and your aphises. You're sticking to Ellen merely from a sense of duty. Maria, I implore you to let me find

that asylum. If you don't there'll be wigs on the green—you won't be able to see the green for wigs. You must pack her off."

Maria rose and stood looking at me whilst she buttoned her gloves.

"Oh, you don't understand," she said after a moment. "There's something that you don't know. I'll never tell you . . . but I thought perhaps you might have guessed." She continued to stare, and seemed to be on the brink of further speech. Then, abruptly, she turned her back on me. "Where's my parasol?" she demanded.

I gave it to her. She held my hand for a moment. "I'm glad you aren't really shocked at my being a burglar!" she said.

"I think you're the most amazing woman!" I exclaimed.

"Oh no," Maria answered modestly. "Any one with any sense of decency would have done just the same. May I have a taxi?"

VIII.

The melodramatic revelations of Maria rendered the prospect of a morning's work quite intolerable. After a futile attempt to

paint I hurled away my brushes, seized a hat, and made for Regent's Park. There, seated on a bank above the romantic though fuliginous canal, I tried to review the situation dispassionately.

I felt vaguely that I owed it to myself to condemn Maria as a criminal; I was, I believe, secretly ashamed to find that I couldn't regard her misdemeanour with cold aversion, but could only look on it as one looks on the fantastic act of a wilful child. My interest in character, as usual, was a narcotic to my moral sense; Maria might be wicked; it was of much more importance that she was wonderful. She had risen in arms against all the prejudices of her early environment—Victoria plus Suburbia, as the epigrammatic Letchsky phrased it—and had deliberately defied conventional morality with a calm conviction that she was perfectly in the right. This, for an elderly spinster who had been cribbed and cabined for more than forty years, was, spectacularly, good work.

When my thoughts turned towards the future, however, I felt somewhat uncomfortable. It was true that Maria imagined she possessed some mysterious hold upon

Ellen, but it was also true that she had not realised how sharp a sense of injury Ellen was nursing; she had not enjoyed the privilege of overhearing that strange conversation in my studio. If Ellen went to a solicitor with her grievance there would probably be no legal sequel except that of her obtaining control of her own income; but if, as was probable, she poured her tale of woe into the sympathetic ear of one of her parsons, the result, unless he were a man of tact, might be scandal and much annoyance to Maria. I found myself quite incapable of regarding the affair from any point of view but that of Maria's interest. I suppose that I had succumbed to the poison of her morally specious arguments, for I did not feel the faintest twinge of sympathy for poor Ellen, who was really pathetic, and it was merely practical prudence which made me decide that Maria must in future renounce her control of Ellen's income and promise to pay back all that she had—borrowed. To decide this was easy; to persuade Maria to performance would be a different matter. At present Maria was engaged in the exhilarating pastime of defying an unconscious world

from her pinnacle of bravado: it remained to be seen whether, when the world moved in its slumber and began to growl, the old conventionalism in her blood would re-assert itself and she would come down with a run. I felt doubtful about this desirable sequel; a woman who has found a means of self-realisation, of self-expression—it may take the form of a lover, a baby, or a bad novel—will usually cling to it as ivy clings to the oak; and also, Maria was profoundly convinced that her dubious proceedings had a secure basis of personal integrity. But at any rate it was my mission to pull her down from the pinnacle, though I realised the fact with regret—she looked so splendid on the summit! The process of removal could not be delayed; perhaps at that very moment Ellen was encamped in the chaste shade of some clerical study, sowing in a fertile soil the dragon's teeth that would presently spring up as armed imps of mischief.

Having resolved on the part I was to play in the affair, I lit a cigar, put my feet on a chair, and was about to abandon myself to sensuous enjoyment of the purely dramatic aspect of late events, when I heard

a voice which called me by name. I turned and saw, in the road which was close to my retreat, a tall young man on a white horse. It was Letchsky. He waved his whip, and I rose and went towards him. His lanky figure was seen at its best on horseback. He was still dressed somewhat unconventionally; his hat brim was broader and his clothes looser than was customary, but certainly he looked picturesque—even graceful. My capacity for appreciating the points of a horse is about as large as my knowledge of deep-sea vegetation or Hertzian waves, but even my pedestrian intelligence was able to grasp the fact that he was riding a very beautiful Arab—a real aristocrat of horses, worthy of the burden of Zayn-al-Aynim or the Princess Badroulbadour.

He was in high spirits, and rallied me on my method of passing the working hours. I retorted in kind. "You seem to be living entirely for pleasure," I said; "I hear that you hire a horse and ride abroad every morning. Did you hire this one in Damascus, or did a Djinn bring him with your shaving water?"

Letchsky clapped the Arab's curving neck.

"He's no hireling," he answered. "Are you, my beauty? He's a pure-bred Arab,—belongs to Sir Julius Steinmann. They're friends of mine; I often sing at their house. It's that big one with the columns over there." He seemed about to say something more, then he closed his mouth and contemplated me with an amused eye.

I waited for him to speak, but he continued to look at me as if I were an animal about to perform a trick. At length I demanded the reason of his mirth.

He grinned broadly. "Weren't you hugely surprised when she turned up?" he said.

"Who turned up?" I demanded, with an air of innocence.

Letchsky drew a grotesque shape in the air with his whip.

"Old Ellen," he said. "I call it scandalous."

"Oh! you know about that already, then?" I cried. He nodded vigorously. "I was there last night, playing the piano and waiting for Maria," he said. "Ellen came in, snorted, sniffed, growled, barked, and went for me like a jaguar. I really thought she would bite me. She told me that she hated me and ordered me out of the house; she added

that she had seen you and that you had sworn to help her to exterminate me. She called me all sorts of names; I'd no idea she had such a command of nervous English. Of course I knew what was the matter, and I continued to play soothing melodies on the piano, but she wasn't soothed. Then Maria came back and there was a dreadful rumpus, and the end of it was that Ellen was taken to bed, breathing fire and brimstone and shouting your name. I congratulate you on being chosen as her champion; *la Belle Alliance, quoi!*"

I ignored his taunts. "Ellen's a preposterous old imbecile," I remarked. "But you said just now that you knew what was the matter with her? Is that true?"

Letchsky looked at me keenly for a moment.

"Perfectly," he answered. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it? At least it was pretty obvious last night. Didn't you know?"

"No," I said. "I'd suspected it for some time, though. And I must take this opportunity, my young friend," I added in a really grand manner, "of impressing on you most solemnly that it can't go on—that it must stop at once."

Letchsky stared at me as if I had suddenly become a lunatic.

"Stop!" he echoed. "What do you mean? How on earth can I stop it? I've nothing to do with her; I'm not a parson or a doctor." He paused for a moment, surveying me with wide eyes. "What on earth are you talking about?" he cried.

I imagined that he was trying to bluff me. "You can stop it," I said impressively, "by one very simple act. You can make up your mind not to take another penny from Maria. You've had far too much already; it's not good for you, for your self-respect, to be living on the bounty of a friend, and it has got her into this sordid muddle. You'll be very poor, I daresay, for a time; make up your mind to face it, to plunge into work, to give up all this kind of thing. You'll be glad, and probably the world will be glad of the renunciation, ten years hence."

Letchsky's expression of astonishment continued to deepen during my delivery of this truly noble exhortation; then it cleared away suddenly, and he smiled again.

"I always thought you didn't understand," he said pleasantly.

I began to feel extremely irritated.

"At any rate, I understand that you have been playing cards for high stakes and relying on Maria to pay your debts," I said. "It's one thing to let her help you with your work, your career—I've no doubt she paid for those concerts at Queen's Hall,—and it's another thing to get into a fast set and make Maria pay your footing amongst a lot of people to whom you don't introduce her. Plain persons call that kind of behaviour by a very ugly and expressive name."

Letchsky's smile remained. "What name?" he inquired calmly.

"Cadging," I replied savagely.

Letchsky seemed to be determined not to take offence at anything that I said. He rubbed the ears of his horse very gently with his whip.

"I don't imagine it's any good our arguing," he said, "and I believe I explained my theory about the use a struggling artist may make of other people's money a long time ago. And you can't deny that it gave Maria the greatest pleasure of her life. If I hadn't realised that I believe I would have stopped taking her presents, for I like her;

I wouldn't merely make use of her as I would of—some people. It isn't as if there were any question of her not being able to afford it. She's enormously rich."

I felt a premature thrill of triumph.

"I see that it's *you* who don't understand," I said. "You certainly didn't listen to Ellen attentively enough. Maria has been overdrawing her account at the bank ever since she knew you, and she has been taking Ellen's money—embezzling, as she calls it—for your sake. Perhaps you didn't know that she had control of it all."

Letchsky did not seem at all shocked by this revelation, but he was certainly amused. He dropped the reins, threw back his head, and laughed aloud.

"It's really funny, isn't it," he said, "to think of pious old Ellen paying my debts at Bridge? It's the best thing I ever heard. Maria really *is* fine!" He laughed again; there was no mistaking the honesty of his amusement. I began to think that every one in the world must have contrived to get rid of all moral sense.

"It may seem funny to you," I said severely, "but it isn't much fun for poor old Ellen."

Letchsky turned towards me a face that was still contorted with laughter.

"Oh! I don't care a penny curse about poor old Ellen!" he cried. "Now that I know it isn't Maria's money——" He paused, looking at me with mirthful eyes. "It was weak of you to mention Ellen," he said. "You ought to have made up a story about Maria being ruined by my extravagance. Of course I shall be worse than ever now."

He certainly was an amazingly impudent young man. His frank delight in the present situation seemed to me in the worst taste, and I had a dim idea that I myself was affording him food for laughter. My fears and scruples, of course, seemed to him merely old - fashioned nonsense. After a while, however, he leant towards me.

"You look dreadfully uncomfortable," he said. "To relieve your feelings, I don't mind telling you that perhaps the process won't last very long."

"The process?" I repeated.

"The process of Ellen - squeezing," he explained. "I daresay that I shan't have to finish her off completely. If you find that, after all, Ellen remains comparatively rich,

you can, of course, put it down to your own powers of persuasion."

"I certainly intend to persuade Maria not to give you another penny," I snapped.

He smiled blandly. "Oh! you won't make any impression on Maria," he said. "But, joking apart, it's extremely probable that I shan't need any money from her very soon."

"I suppose there's another victim in the background," I remarked.

He did not seem to hear my bitter comment; he was looking fixedly down the road. My glance followed his, and I saw that a woman on horseback was approaching us. Letchsky watched her, and then turned to me.

"Not exactly in the background," he said, with one of his uncanny grins. He turned his horse; at the same moment the lady touched hers with the whip, and cantered over the soft earth by the side of the road to the spot where we stood.

"You bad boy!" she cried to Letchsky. "I've been looking for you all over the Park! So much for your promises to meet expectant females at half-past ten!"

She was a very large young woman, handsome in the *bravura* style, with jet black hair and a brilliant complexion. She was

dressed with almost excessive smartness, and rode astride. In spite of it being obvious that she enjoyed radiant health, she had an oddly languorous air—perhaps it was caused by her very long, slanting eyelids,—and one felt that she would show to greater advantage in artificial light. In the mild autumnal sunshine she seemed inappropriate, jarring; she was like some vivid exotic flower that had escaped from a hothouse.

Whilst I was thus mentally condemning the poor lady to an indoor existence, Letchsky had exchanged a few words with her; then he presented me. Her name, I discovered, was Ada Steinmann, and she was a daughter of the philanthropist who had lent Letchsky his Arab steed. Miss Steinmann surveyed me curiously, but was good enough to remark that she was glad to meet any friend of Paul's. Then she asked me if I were any relation of Mr Lane the artist; and when I replied that I was that celebrity visible in the flesh, she became suddenly gracious. Her father, who lived entirely for pictures and music, possessed many examples of my work which he had bought in Paris. She herself, too, loved pictures, and had been painted by Sargent. "Very clever, of course," she said,

"but he gave me such a grin! — just like this." She stretched her full wide mouth extensively, displaying two rows of large and very brilliant teeth. Then she turned abruptly to Letchsky. "What about our ride?" she exclaimed, and smote the Arab's hindquarters emphatically with her whip. That king of animals tossed his proud head indignantly and started forward, and a moment later the two riders were cantering away from me. Letchsky turned to look at me as they went, and I saw, or fancied I saw, that his eyes were positively lambent with mockery.

IX.

Late in that afternoon I went to see Maria. I found her seated at the bureau in her own little room — a piece of furniture which usually served as a dumping-ground for postage stamps, old letters, abortive wool-work, and toys for the East End children. For once, she did not look particularly pleased to see me; she had a tired and troubled aspect, and was suffering, I supposed, from the reaction that followed on the excitement of the morning.

"I hope you haven't come to argue," she said. "Just now I really don't feel that I could."

This was unpromising, but my heart was hot within me, and I was convinced that any postponement of the discussion was perilous to Maria. I summoned up all my rhetorical resources and urged her to refrain from financing Letchsky. I had no new arguments to offer. I could only reiterate my old cry—that it was bad for his work, that it encouraged him to be idle and dissipated, that it would lead to perpetual friction with Ellen. Maria set her lips and watched me with irritated eyes, but said nothing until I asserted my belief that her cutting off supplies would not really inconvenience him, that he had hinted the prospect of other resources. Then the sharp lines showed suddenly on her face, and for a moment she seemed to struggle vainly for speech.

"What do you mean?" she cried. "He won't make money with his work for years."

"Well, from what he said this morning—" I began. She interrupted me with a cry.

"Did you see him this morning—after you saw me?" she demanded. I answered her question. She looked at me like an angry

little inquisitor. "You didn't say anything about it—about the money?" she said quickly. I replied that I had revealed everything to Letchsky. She clasped her hands and pressed them against her lips.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but just now I feel as if I never wanted to speak to you again. Can't men ever keep secrets?" She was silent for some time, and stared at the miscellaneous collection of rubbish on her desk. "Oh, Arthur, how could you?" she said at length. "Don't you see how difficult you've made it for me? The poor boy will refuse to touch a penny."

I laughed this fantastic idea to scorn.

"Refuse! Not he!" I cried crudely. "He said so himself; he shares all your theory about the use to which Ellen's money should be put. He's the most astute young person! But he certainly intimated that he had other resources, so you needn't be afraid that he will starve. In fact, he's cut out for success; I see him in my mind's eye for the next twenty years riding from glory to glory on a thoroughbred Arab. I never met any one more completely capable of taking the good things of life when he finds them."

Maria contemplated me fixedly.

"I wonder what he meant," she murmured, frowning. Then she demanded suddenly, "Was he riding when you met him?"

"The finest horse that I ever saw," I answered.

"Was any one with him?" asked Maria.

"He was torn from me," I explained, "by a young lady of the most opulent and oriental type of beauty." Maria moved her shoulders swiftly.

"Yes, they're Jews," she said through her set teeth. She looked at me again, and I was amazed by her face; it was actually lurid. "That's what he meant," she said slowly, "and I hate it, I hate it!"

"Do you mean that he and Miss Steinmann—" I began.

"Oh, I don't know!" cried Maria. "Only he's always with them; I never see him, and he rides their horses. And he asked if he might bring her here to dinner next week. I had to say yes, of course; but I've seen her, and I know she's just the kind of girl I dislike. She's Bad Style!" she concluded, with an angry sniff.

"She seemed good-natured, and she's very rich," I said. Maria remarked that good-natured people didn't interest her. "She's

not good - natured, really," she continued. She's just fast, and she's got everything she wants. She's self-satisfied. She's exactly the kind of person who is bad for Paul; she'll drag him down; she'll make him lazy about his music and fond of cards and riding and eating. You'll have to come to dinner to meet her."

I promised to do so, secretly hoping that Maria's suspicions might prove correct, and that Miss Steinmann would support Letchsky in luxury for the remainder of his days. Then I inquired after Ellen. Maria made a gesture of contempt.

"I haven't seen her," she said. "She's locked herself in her room." She paused and looked at me as if she regretted having said this,—I could not imagine why. "She hasn't tried to see a solicitor—to make a fuss?" I asked. Maria shrugged her shoulders—an action which intimated, I suppose, that she was completely indifferent to any move on the part of Ellen. She manifested an equal indifference to any remarks that I made; it was obvious that she was in a very bad temper, and regarded me with feelings that were anything but amiable.

"It wasn't your business; you oughtn't to

have interfered," she said several times, after I had tried to make her see that I had been impelled by the noblest possible motives in admonishing Letchsky. "People too often mistake curiosity for sympathy," was another of her remarks—a decidedly clever one, I thought afterwards. "You know nothing, really, about things—about my life," she had added obscurely.

At length I rose to go. She gave me her hand, which was feverish, but she vouchsafed me no farewell smile. Instead, she looked up at me with very bright, irascible eyes. "Oh, I'm so cross!" she said. She turned away and began to open and shut the little drawers in her bureau, but before I reached the door she called to me.

"Arthur," she said without looking at me, "please understand that it's quite useless to discuss that subject—you know what I mean—any more. I'd sell the clothes off my back—I'd pawn Ellen's only bonnet—if it would be any use to Paul. As I said before, it's nothing to do with you. People are too fussy, and imagine things far too much."

I departed,—with dignity, I hope, but feeling that my mission had so far enjoyed the scantiest success. Maria's remarks about

Miss Steinmann, however, were balm unto my wounded spirit; Letchsky had intimated to me some time before that he would probably marry money; his union with the daughter of the magnificent Sir Julius would effectively put an end to Maria's philanthropic crimes. I felt a real relief as I went downstairs.

I was accustomed to let myself out of the house, and I was putting on my coat when I became aware of a strange sound which proceeded, apparently, from behind the closed door of Ellen's sitting-room, nicknamed the Holy of Holies by the profane Letchsky. The sound seemed to alternate between wailing and laughter; but fell, at intervals, to a long-drawn crooning note. I listened for a few moments, wondering whether Ellen had become completely mad or was holding a revivalist meeting, when there was a sudden crash of splintering glass, followed immediately by a succession of truly blood-chilling yells. I rushed to the door; it was locked; I hammered vehemently on the panels, and the shrieks subsided to a rapid sequence of groans. Nature and a fairly athletic life have endowed me with a generous portion of brute force; I took a step backward and

then hurled myself against the door. It yielded suddenly, and I hurtled headlong into Ellen's bower.

On the details of the scene which met my eyes when I had picked myself up it is well to draw a decent veil. Ellen lay on the floor; for one moment I thought that she was dying; in the next I realised that she was in the last stage of intoxication. . . . I stood there staring at her, stupidly helpless; then I heard a sound behind me, and turned to find that Maria had entered the room. She gave one glance at Ellen, then looked at me. I shall never forget the aspect of her face at that moment. We remained confronting each other in silence for a space of time that seemed to me an age, but at last she spoke.

“So now you know!” she said, with a kind of triumphant bitterness in her voice. “It’s been like this for ten years.” Her face twitched horribly. She covered it with her hands and sank on to a chair. The miserable Ellen began to sing a hymn.

X.

I stayed with Maria, after Ellen had been hidden away, until nearly midnight. For a long time she would not speak, but sat staring into vacancy with haunted eyes ; at last she began to tell me the wretched history in vague, disconnected sentences, and speech brought her the further relief of tears. Ellen, it appeared, had become addicted to secret drinking some time before Mrs Bastable's death, and since that event the vice had dominated her completely ; even during the first years of her married life she had been a slave to it. Maria had fought it from the first steadily and fruitlessly ; Ellen had all the craftiness of the female degenerate ; she would bribe the servants, she would employ tradesmen who made a fine art of smuggling alcohol into the house in all manner of ingenious disguises ; she would smuggle it herself—the device would have been laughable in any other connection—by means of rubber hot-water bottles concealed under her clothes. Maria had done everything possible to prevent her from obtaining it, but with no success ; the “attacks,” as she called

them, occurred once a fortnight with monotonous regularity. It was wonderful that Maria should have concealed them from the world, and that Ellen had aroused no suspicion in her clerical friends for so long a period; but Ellen, it seemed, had still the grace to be ashamed of herself at the end of each orgy, and was deeply anxious that her failing should remain a secret. Her detestation of Letchsky, Maria said, was partly due to a suspicion that either he had guessed the existence of her weakness or that Maria had confided in him.

Actually, Maria had confided in no one. For twelve years—since her mother's death—she had kept the grim secret by the simple process of refusing to see all her former friends and declining to make new ones. It was some time after she had known Letchsky that she decided to let him come to the house, and I discovered that she had been aware of my existence in London for several months before she wrote to me. Of the price that she had paid for her pride her face was only too eloquent a witness, and as I thought of that long nightmare of self-imposed imprisonment I felt sick with pity. I tried, very clumsily, to express my

sympathy, but she cut me short. "What's the use of living if one doesn't see things through?" she said. "Facts are facts, and one has to face them." I was absolutely determined that the present fact had been faced, in all its sordid ugliness, far too long; I felt that I would contrive to uproot and banish the disastrous Ellen even if I had to kidnap her by night in a sack; but I knew that it would be worse than futile to confide this resolution to Maria.

Now that the long hidden secret was out she seemed to find comfort in telling me all the details connected with it. The story was not a beautiful one, and I found myself wondering more and more how she had found strength to fulfil her self-appointed duty; I am not remarkably sensitive, but I know that if I had been caught in such a sinister tangle of circumstances I should either have become a lunatic or have fled irrevocably. We are all very wise nowadays in our analysis of the feminine temperament; every one of us can generalise cheerfully concerning its passions, its prejudices, its rapid instincts and amazing blindnesses, but has any just and sagacious estimate ever been made of the patient courage of women?

She would have willingly continued to talk, I believe, throughout the night; several times, when I tried to depart, she begged me to remain. At midnight I insisted on her going to bed, and she came with me down the wide stairs to the front door. The house was absolutely silent and, I realised almost with a shudder, oppressively sinister; in the dim light the various pieces of Victorian furniture seemed to crouch like a slumbering herd of heavy beasts. I went into the dining-room to find a cigarette, and switched on the lights. From above the mantelpiece the shrewd little blue eyes of old Mr Bastable watched me intently, with the air, more than ever, of having made a successful and satirical jest at my expense. . . .

I passed the greater part of the next day in a fruitless endeavour to concoct some scheme which would result in the banishment of Ellen; I could find no argument which would be likely to overrule Maria's determination to stand by her sister to the end. Therefore it was with hearty relief that I heard her voice on the telephone late that evening, announcing the stupendous news that Ellen had gone away—had fled to a hotel on the south coast in company with

the stalwart maid who usually attended her. These were very joyful tidings; even a temporary respite for Maria was most desirable, and I gave free rein to my astonishment and satisfaction.

Maria did not seem to share the first of these emotions. "I thought she might want to go away," she said. I demanded her reason for expecting so unwonted an activity on the part of Ellen; she replied that it was impossible for her to tell me on the telephone, but added immediately afterwards, "She knows that you saw her yesterday and it worries her. She's very sensitive about—some things; she can't bear the thought of meeting you." I announced that if this was a fact I should immediately settle in Bayswater. Maria ignored this threat. "I don't know that I ought to have let her go," she said, "but Mary Ann, who was with us at Ravensholme, will try to look after her, and I felt after talking to you that I'd give anything to have the house to myself for a week. My nerve seems to have gone completely now that I've confided in some one." At this moment a dreadful buzzing and gurgling began in the telephone and she rang off.

My astonishment at Ellen's possessing a sense of shame was almost forgotten in my delight at her departure. She was out of the house; the next thing was to prevent her return. I had wild thoughts of begging her sister to send her a large sum of money and all her parsonic socks, in the hope that the combination of affluence, her usual labours, and the air of the south coast would prove lastingly attractive; I thought, too, of imploring Maria to advertise instantly for a companion and to go abroad for a year. When I saw her again my hopes began to multiply; Maria, after the shock of Ellen's abrupt exodus had passed away, was really enjoying her solitude. It was actually the first time, I discovered, that she had been separated from Ellen since the latter came to live with her after that luckless matrimonial experiment. We celebrated the occasion duly; I dined with her nearly every evening, and we went to every theatre that was open and to all kinds of music halls; I gave tea-parties in the studio, during which Maria sat with her finger pressed, so to speak, on the very pulse of modern art; we shopped enormously, we visited Hampton Court and Kew and Richmond, and we never

mentioned Ellen. Maria improved in appearance rapidly ; the tired lines, at times, seemed almost to have vanished from her face, and as I regarded the tonic effect of Ellen's absence, I felt a wicked yearning for that dreadful person to be visited, during her sojourn on the south coast, with an uncontrollable impulse to swim far across the baths of ocean and never to come back any more.

There was another change in Maria which I viewed with complacency. She scarcely spoke of Letchsky, and when I mentioned him she dropped the subject very soon. He did not appear in Bayswater during the first fortnight of Ellen's absence ; and afterwards, when he came in one evening to play, she snapped at him and contradicted everything that he said. Letchsky was at first plainly amused at this display of the primitive feminine emotions, and lured her on to further extravagance ; subsequently, to my astonishment, he became irritated, answered her loudly and rudely, and then detached himself from our society and wandered round the room looking gloomily at the late Mr Bastable's painful collection of pictures. Later, when I went downstairs with him, he

confided to me that there were moments in his life when he vowed that he would never enter the house again. "It's a hopelessly unreal atmosphere," he said; "it makes me pant." I remarked that he had made this discovery rather late in the day. The way in which he glowered at me showed that he understood the innuendo. He went out with a loud banging of the door.

When I re-entered the drawing-room Maria made no allusion to him, but spoke for the first time of Ellen. She had received from the faithful Mary Ann a letter informing her that Ellen was contented with the south coast, and that no unseemly event had occurred. "Mary Ann has managed to keep everything from her," she added. I answered her, I suppose, brutally. "Oh! give her everything she wants," I cried, "if only she'll stay away!" Maria was shocked. "I won't let you talk like that," she said. After a moment she added pensively, "Poor Ellen! I sometimes feel very sorry. I'm not sure that I shan't go down to her soon."

I rose, disgusted. "Oh! your fatal sense of duty!" I cried, as I took her hand.

"It's not!" snapped Maria indignantly.

XI.

It was a week later, I think, that the dinner-party took place. Maria had adjured Letchsky to make Miss Steinmann expect only the simplest entertainment, but the feast in reality recalled to my mind all the heavy splendours of Ravensholme; the gold plate gleamed; there was a profusion of hot-house flowers, and merely the sight of the menu made me feel like a Roman Emperor of the decadence. Mr Bastable's brownest sherry, Mrs Bastable's sweetest champagne, had been disinterred from the cellar where they had languished so long in darkness; there was a liqueur, I believe, after every course—I remember distinctly being offered one with the partridges—and when the banquet was only half finished there were *sorbets* and cigarettes.

Miss Steinmann, as I had foreseen, looked magnificent beneath Maria's too brilliant electric lights. She wore a dress of shimmering purple, which was certainly not designed to conceal the contours of her fine figure—she had the most beautiful arms and shoulders that I had ever seen—and she

moved with the deliberate majesty of some splendid animal. Maria, who had put on her best frock and too many diamonds, looked grey and shrunken beside her, yet kept an odd little air of neat distinction which formed the quaintest contrast with the opulent, almost aggressive beauty of the girl. Physically, Miss Steinmann was exactly at her zenith; a little more flesh, a few coarse lines about her mouth, would ruin her charm and make her look like an over-blown peony; but for the moment she was a glorious type: I felt that I would give a good deal to paint her in a scarlet dress with a dead-white rose in her hair.

Besides her beauty, there was another obvious fact about her: she was tremendously in love with Letchsky. Her affection was not manifested in her speech—she addressed him with brusque *camaraderie*—but when she looked at him there was the unmistakable light in her eyes, the steadfast fire that has no counterfeit and wakes irritation or envy in the heart of the luckless male who observes but does not evoke it. It had the same effect, apparently, on a female heart; we had only been seated at the dinner-table for a very short time when I realised that

Maria was in the worst of tempers, though at first she made a moderately successful attempt to be polite. Before dinner she had informed me that she regretted her remarks concerning Miss Steinmann, and had made up her mind to like her. It was plain, very soon to me, if not to the others, that she had set herself a task beyond her powers. In fact, she was at her worst; she fidgeted nervously, watched Letchsky, who was as garrulous as ever, with a strained expression, and kept on breaking into the conversation with shrill, emphatic utterances, which plainly showed that she had not listened to a word that the previous speaker had said. On several occasions she contradicted some very inoffensive remark with quite unnecessary vehemence, and once she said something to Miss Steinmann which was nothing less than a severe snub. I must record that Miss Steinmann behaved very well; after a while, however, I saw her look at Maria with a long, meditative stare, and thenceforth she addressed herself almost entirely to Letchsky and me. Evidently she had decided that Maria was exactly what she appeared to be at the moment—a waspish and virulent old maid. Some queer telepathy

must exist between women ; Maria plainly realised that her guest had summed up against her, and she became more irritable than ever.

Personally, I liked Miss Steinmann. She was a modern type ; slangy but intelligent, with almost superabundant vitality and a distinctly humorous trick of speech. I suspect that throughout her life she had managed to get everything she wanted ; but she was not arrogant, only calmly self-confident, and her tolerance of Maria's rudeness—there is really no other word for it—did her great credit. They made, as I said, the most acute contrast ; but towards the end of that sumptuous and uncomfortable repast I caught myself thinking treacherously that one quality which formed a conspicuous virtue in women was wholly lacking in Maria—a natural ease in dealing with difficult situations. As soon as Maria's nerves were upset she became as primitive as a Polynesian ; she cast off the garments of civility and laid about her mentally, so to speak, with a wild and inconsequent hatchet. In essential things—in kindness and whole-hearted devotion, in breeding even—she was doubtless immeasurably superior to Miss Steinmann, but there was no doubt, also, which

of them on any given occasion would have the first prize for behaviour. The girl's easy manner was remarkable, especially when one was certain that she was yearning at heart for the moment when she would be safely outside the front door. Her self-possession was complete enough to prevent one from being sorry for her, but I felt angry with Maria, who seemed to find a vicious pleasure in showing her really admirable self to the greatest possible disadvantage.

Letchsky was, I think, the only member of the party who derived enjoyment from the situation; he discoursed to us, as usual, with abundant eloquence, and ate and drank as if he had been starving for a week instead of lunching at the Carlton with his *fiancée*. At intervals, when Maria had been lured by him to further excesses of vitriolic speech, he looked at me with eyes that were charged with malicious intelligence. Maria scarcely spoke directly to him; but once, when she addressed him by his Christian name, she turned abruptly to Miss Steinmann. "You don't *mind* my calling him that, do you?" she demanded. Miss Steinmann displayed complete unconcern. "Why on earth should I?" she said calmly, and

Maria winced. Obviously she had hoped that Miss Steinmann *would* mind; she saw herself, poor sentimental Maria, as a possible rival. "I don't know, only people are so funny about things!" she murmured. I remarked drearily that every one seemed to call every one else by his Christian name nowadays, and Maria replied that it was a stupid habit unless people were really fond of each other. No jealous fires appeared to burn in Miss Steinmann's truly magnificent bosom; she smiled pleasantly and continued to eat her *pêche Melba*.

It was a great relief to me when the feast came to an end with coffee and more liqueurs. Maria in reality disliked tobacco; when she smoked a cigarette she always had the air of a child pretending to enjoy its first clandestine whiff; on that evening, however, she managed to dispose of two, and then she made a signal to me. "We'll go upstairs," she said, and turning to the others, added, "You children may go into my room and have another cigarette." Miss Steinmann seemed surprised and also rose. "Oh no, thanks," she answered. "We'll come upstairs with you and Paul shall play."

Paul played, I suppose, for nearly an hour.

Miss Steinmann sat in a deep arm-chair and contemplated the fire; her heavy eyelids drooped; I am not certain that she did not indulge in a brief slumber. Maria sat bolt upright on a sofa near her, watching Letchsky, whose yellow mane kept on falling over his eyes. He played finely, as usual, but Maria did not seem to be deriving enjoyment from his performance; indeed, from her expression one would have imagined that he was causing her to suffer almost excruciating anguish. I found myself becoming annoyed with her; it really was ridiculous that she should take this very ordinary event so much to heart and treat the unoffending Miss Steinmann as if she were a wily supplanter. . . . After all, Letchsky wasn't her only friend. . . . Soon afterwards she forsook her sofa and came to sit near me. I saw then that the tears had started to her eyes, but I am afraid that even this harrowing spectacle left me cold; she really was, I thought, too absurdly sentimental. I pretended not to observe her emotion, and kept my eyes fixed on Letchsky with an expression of intelligent interest. Presently I felt Maria touch my sleeve.

"Do you think I was very rude?" she

asked in a whisper. "Fairly," I answered, still gazing at Letchsky. Maria sniffed. "I know, I know!" she said. "But I couldn't help it. I felt as if I had a sort of malicious devil inside me. Something seemed to make me go on giving her chances to score off me all round. And she did, didn't she?"

I glanced apprehensively at Miss Steinmann, but that beautiful person was apparently lost in slumber or drowsy meditation.

"*She* behaved properly," I said.

"And I didn't, you mean," retorted Maria. "I suppose I was dreadful, but I don't really care. It's the end, anyhow, and it may as well come now as later on. It was bound to come, wasn't it?"

"The end of what?" I inquired. Maria made an impatient movement. "You know what I mean," she said. "She hates me."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"She hates me," repeated Maria. "And as soon as they go to-night she'll make him promise never to come here again. I saw it in her face when she looked at him. Then, of course, I didn't care what I said," she concluded with another sniff.

"It's all a fuss about nothing," I said. "You'll all be very good friends. What's

the use of being tragic?" Maria looked offended. "I feel tragic!" she said. Even as she made this declaration, Letchsky rose from the piano. "If you people are going to talk, I may as well stop," he said cheerfully. Miss Steinmann opened her eyes, looked at him, and then rose slowly and gracefully and walked to where Maria was sitting. "I hope you will come to see me some day," she said. I saw Maria screw up her eyes and bite her lips, and I felt unhappy.

"You know you don't really want me!" she cried. Miss Steinmann looked at her for a moment, smiling vaguely, as a polite but critical person smiles at a bad joke; then, without speaking, she shook hands with me and sailed nobly out of the room. Remorse, I suppose, must have seized Maria, for she murmured something about Miss Steinmann's cloak and started in pursuit. Letchsky and I lingered for a moment outside the drawing-room door talking.

"I may as well tell you," said Letchsky, "that we're going to be married very soon. It's a farcical ceremony, but old Sir Julius seems to want it—in a church, you know, with patent-leather boots, and parsons, and the dreadful thing from 'Lohengrin.'"

"I congratulate you very heartily," I said.
"Miss Steinmann is both beautiful and wise."

"Oh, she's more sense than most of 'em," said this devout lover airily. "By the way, do you remember my telling you that I should have to marry money? I suppose you think I'm doing that now. Well, I'm not. I fell in love with her before I knew she had a farthing. That's partly why she likes me. But of course you don't believe that, do you?"

Letchsky had his defects, but he was not a liar. There was a luminous candour in his dark eyes, and I believed him at once. At the same time I felt greatly amused at this characteristic parade of his own virtue. "You were born lucky," I said; "you've increased your self-respect and gained material rewards as well." He grinned.

"Old Sir Julius is pretty nearly a millionaire," he said, "and Ada's his only child. I expect you'll have to paint my portrait now. Do you think you could manage to break the news gently to Maria?"

I was about to reply, when a peculiar sequence of sounds arose from the hall. I heard voices raised in sharp altercation, a heavy shuffling of feet, and then an ugly

kind of strangled cry. A bell rang violently, and there were more footsteps. Letchsky and I looked a tone another and made for the stairs. As we reached the angle of the balustrade we heard the sound of a closing door. Maria came towards us. "It's all right," she said; "it's nothing!" Her face was a direct contradiction to the words. Miss Steinmann was standing near the hall door wrapped in a shimmering opera cloak; she was looking extremely startled, but she said nothing. She made an imperious signal to Letchsky; he shook hands with Maria, and a moment later they had vanished into the night.

"What has happened?" I asked. Maria stood close to me, trembling. For some time she seemed unable to speak.

"She has come back," she said at last in a low voice.

"Ellen?" I cried. She nodded. I noticed that the pupils of her eyes were widely dilated; she was white, and looked almost ghastly. "You mean that she came just now?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "She came in just before we went down. She was alone; she got away from Mary Ann. Oh, Arthur!"

she cried suddenly; "she was dreadful, perfectly dreadful!"

"You mean——" I began. She nodded slowly. "Worse than ever," she said. "She insulted Miss Steinmann, and said horrible words to me. Luckily she didn't see Paul. One of the servants took her away—almost had to carry her." Her lips quivered; she looked at me with desperate eyes. "This really *is* the end!" she said.

"It must be," I agreed. "If you let her stay here you'll have cheerful scenes of this kind happening every day. Give her her money and shoot her off; it's dangerous to have her in the house."

"I didn't mean that," said Maria. She walked into the dining - room and stood looking for some moments at the picture of old Mr Bastable. Then she sank into a chair and pressed her hands against her temples.

"Oh, I'm tired, tired!" she cried. Her body seemed to shrink into itself; she looked pitifully small and frail. "One can't go on fighting for ever, can one?" she added, after another interval.

"There's no need to try," I said. "You kept the secret for a long time, but it's out

now; we all know, and we know how brave you've been. Give it up; don't go on making your own life a hell when everything can be arranged so simply. Any doctor would insist on your living apart."

Maria nodded slowly.

"Yes, I give it up," she said. "Everything can be arranged."

Even in the midst of my depression at seeing her so miserable from this disgusting *contretemps*, I was conscious of a comfortable thrill of relief. Maria had yielded; she would strive no more; she would find peace at last. "You won't change your mind to-morrow?" I said sternly.

A wan smile flickered for a moment over her face.

"No, not to-morrow. Never any more," she answered.

XII.

I walked along the edge of the park, and the fine night lured me into making the rest of my journey on foot. I reached my house just before midnight, and was taking off my coat when the telephone bell rang. I placed the receiver at my ear and heard an excited

voice asking me to return at once to the house in Bayswater. The mistress was ill, very ill, it said. For a moment my thoughts jumped towards Maria; then I realised that, of course, it was Ellen who was ill; retribution for her long depravity had seized her at last. I felt no kind of sympathy with Ellen, but fear that she had become violent and was terrifying Maria made me ring up a cab-stand at once, and five minutes later I was whirling down the Edgware Road. When I reached the house a tearful maid opened the door. Her tears surprised me, until I remembered that emotion for emotion's sake is the first doctrine of her tribe. "Is she very ill?" I asked. The maid held her apron to her eyes. "Oh, sir," she said; "it was all over a half-hour ago, only we didn't like to tell you on the telephone. She had something for when she couldn't sleep, and the doctor says she took too much. She went straight to her room, and then we heard her fall. She was dead before the doctor could come."

So everything was solved at last. I hardly care to state what I felt at that moment. "Is he here still?" I asked. The maid stifled a sob. "Yes, sir," she said; "he's upstairs in

the drawing - room, waiting for you. He asked if there was any one sensible we could send for." I took off my coat. "Where's Miss Maria?" I demanded.

The maid—she was a pretty, round-cheeked creature of about eighteen—stared at me for a long moment as if I were a spectre, then she uttered a stifled cry.

"Oh, sir, didn't you understand?" she said.

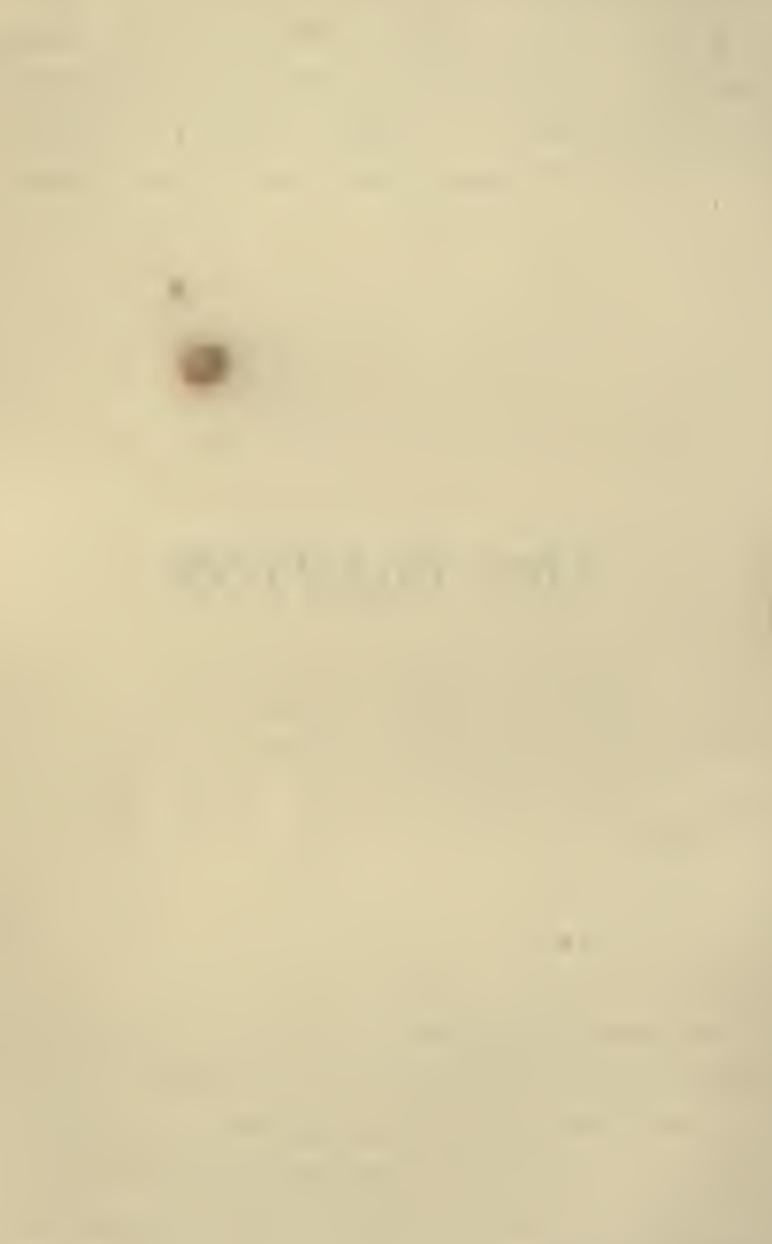
I felt a horrible sensation of sickness. "What! you don't mean——?" I began. She nodded, still staring at me with appalled eyes. The lights in the hall seemed to swing like a thousand censers. I took a step forward, trembling violently. At that moment, from behind the door of Ellen's room, a voice rose, a raucous yet cheerful voice, which sang emphatically—

You ask me why I love, when love should be
A thing unheard of, DEAD, 'twixt you and me.

A wild burst of laughter followed, then silence. The little servant forgot that she was a servant and clung to my arm. She was shivering with terror and sobbed loudly. "Oh, sir," she cried; "if only our Lord had seen fit! If only it had been her that was

taken!" I shook her from my arm and ran past that accursed door. As I rushed upstairs I heard the noise of her sobs mingled with the song of Ellen. . . . The doctor must have thought me a madman. . . .

THE PHANTOM



THE PHANTOM.

I.

As he went down the narrow staircase he encountered a group of women who were talking too loudly and had the peculiar, slightly defiant air of independence which is occasionally to be observed in ladies' clubs. They stared at him for a moment; the New Epoch was not large, and they were all aware that he was engaged to the eccentric young woman who invariably took possession of the lilac boudoir and glared like a Medusa at any one who ventured to look in at the door. Their voices became less noisy as he passed them—a change which he felt dimly, and perhaps unjustly, to be only another symptom of their disgusting manners—and he noticed that one

of them, a stout lady with short white hair, gold-rimmed spectacles, and an aspect half-pugilistic, half-professorial, observed him with a look of pity. No doubt, he thought, she was one of those modern monsters who reviled marriage, and regarded any one who was "engaged" as a lost soul. However, there was no reason for her to worry. Afterwards it seemed to him extraordinary that these thoughts had come into his mind at such a moment. He passed the group of talkers and continued to descend the stairs, still hoping that he might hear a door above open suddenly and the sound of swift feet that followed him, as had so often happened. . . . Through the glass panels of the smoking - room he was able to see various young women who lounged or lay in more or less unconventional attitudes; they wore very tight skirts and most apparent stockings; they smoked cigarettes and read regrettable illustrated magazines. The sight of these fairly inoffensive young persons depressed him yet more, and, in the usual manner of the short - sighted male, he promptly assigned them to a class from which, in all probability, they were perfectly remote. Bachelor women! The hate-

ful phrase, the vile contradiction in terms, rang in his brain like the trumpet of an ignorant host that had taken up arms against nature and was ravening amid the ruins of ancient beauty and simplicity; accounting motherhood a burden and marriage a bore, and generally upsetting a thoroughly nice man's notions of their functions in the scheme of life. And these were the companions whom Edith was to join; this was the environment in which, as she phrased it, she would feel free to expand! He turned in disgust from the spectacle of those happily unconscious ladies, took his hat and stick from the hall-porter, who always had the air of a man suffering from a large overdose of female society, and went out into the chilly November twilight.

When he entered his room in the tiny house in Barton Street which she was to have shared with him, he sat down at his writing-table and stared, not at Edith's photograph, but at the portrait of a defunct female relative which hung on the wall above it. His old aunt had been right—she was always right; she had invariably prophesied that if the ship of his life were wrecked the fatal rock would be a passion

for a woman. Her fine, ironical old eyes looked down on him from the picture with an expression that seemed almost triumphant; her firm lips seemed about to part and to say, "I warned you, I warned you; with your temperament what else could you expect?" His temperament—that was the root of the evil! Edith was not to blame; she had been passionately devoted to him; it was his fatal critical propensity that had ruined everything, his idiotic habit of comparing her mentally with any woman whom he happened to meet, and of feeling annoyed because she did not possess certain qualities which he detected, or imagined that he detected, in the new acquaintance. Could any attitude have been more insulting? And yet he had loved her intensely, and, now that the blow had fallen, felt as if all his life-blood had been drained away. He thought of her, and in the midst of his pain felt a strange thrill of pity for her in her loneliness; she had seemed to depend on him so absolutely, with so beautiful a self-surrender!

That she had broken off the engagement was nothing, he knew; it was his own behaviour which had rendered the final rupture inevitable, and it mattered very little whose

hand actually severed the formal tie. She would perhaps find it difficult to live without him, but he had made her realise, through his folly, that it would be harder to live with him. Looking backward with the sharpened vision of despair, he told himself that the curse of his life had been that perverted idealism, that propensity to think, in his old aunt's words, that whatever wasn't was right. He had grown so accustomed to regret that Edith didn't possess certain imaginary virtues of dignity or reticence, that he had lost all capacity for realising how her candid joy in their love, and her complete self-abandonment to him, were divine qualities,—treasures for which a man might search from end to end of the earth and yet return empty-handed. The thought of his last vision of her face made him feel as if he had hurled her to the ground and trampled on her slender throat. What a brute he had been throughout their engagement! A clumsy, surly, stupid brute—and she had been so gay, so dainty, so like a happy child! He had corrected her, and contradicted her, and overwhelmed her with inept and unwieldy irony, and she had never shown any resentment. "Please notice me!" was her only rebuke

when he was more than usually sullen. He had snubbed her, too, just because she was ignorant of a great number of stupid and tedious facts which boys are taught at school, but really she was much cleverer than he was; he had snorted with impatience when she flattened her small nose against shop windows, and then he had dragged her for miles to hunt up some ugly piece of furniture. So his thoughts ran on, with the grotesque and the tragic weirdly intermingled; and meanwhile, Edith, having cried heartily for half an hour, dried her eyes, blew her nose, put on her hat, and wrote to her dearest friend to announce that she had broken off her engagement; that it was much the best thing that could possibly happen; that everything was entirely her own fault; that she was perfectly miserable, and had firmly decided to become a nun,—from which we may conclude that her alleged desire for freedom to expand was merely a fiction uttered from motives of pride or of kindness.

II.

A fortnight passed slowly, and at the end of it he was more miserable than ever. He shunned his friends, and the life of complete loneliness that he led was certainly not a remedy for his aching heart. He tried to work, but the effort resulted in failure; he could only sit, pen in hand, thinking of the past two years, and feeling at the end of each dreary day that one more barrier had come between them. Gradually her personality which, during their engagement, had often seemed misty and unreal when he was not actually with her, became almost supernaturally complete to him; he recalled all the varying light and shade of her expression, all her gestures, and realised the significance of a thousand utterances which had formerly seemed meaningless. Sometimes he felt that some ironical god had dowered him, from truly godlike motives of malice, with the power of understanding, with an unerring appreciation of her fitness; on other occasions he would tell himself that he was a waverer, a sentimental fool, and would try to remember

her defects: how she had irritated him, how she had laughed at people whom he thought important, and behaved like a frivolous butterfly when he was as solemn as a high priest. The attempt, however, brought him little consolation; her defects, from his present point of view, seemed to have undergone some magical change; one and all of them had blossomed into actual qualities. As time went on, another torment began to haunt him: the desire for her physical presence became almost intolerable; he remembered her kisses, her clinging hands, the perfume of her hair, her breath upon his face. . . . When he closed his eyes he was able to conjure up a dim illusion of her figure in the coloured darkness of his brain.

He endured these tortures for another week, and then he wrote her a letter in which he called himself all black names and implored her forgiveness. When he had sent it he found that the load on his heart was greatly lightened; after all, he thought, there was still a chance that she would relent; it must seem as impossible to her as it was to him that so deep an intimacy should cease for ever with such brutal abruptness. And

if she relented, how he would atone for all his folly, his bearishness, his superior airs! The thought of that willing penance made him almost happy, but when a week went by without bringing any answer to his letter, he relapsed into a condition of gloom. For a while he felt a certain lively resentment which kept him from brooding very deeply, and then the obsession of her memory returned with a doubled force, blotting out everything actual, haunting him like his own shadow. In the silence of night he would seem to listen to her voice, and see her eyes gleaming in the darkness. Often, as he sat in his lonely room, he would hear a sound like the noise of rapid feet on the stair, and he would rush to the door, fling it open, and stand breathlessly waiting. But as yet she did not come.

III.

He was sitting in his room on a wild December evening, when the wind was howling round the Barton Street chimney-pots, and flaws of rain were driving against his window. By that time he had progressed

from a state of dim wonder as to whether life would ever be worth living to one of savage certainty that it wouldn't; he had become, his friends observed, permanently morose, and shunned human intercourse like a leper. His fire had gone out, and the room was very cold, but he was past caring for such commonplace discomfort, and crouched at his desk, staring at a sheet of paper and holding in his chilly fingers a pen on which the ink had dried.

Suddenly, without any warning, the miracle happened. He had been thinking, as usual, of Edith, adding up, for the hundredth time, the sum of her vanished virtues and cursing his own folly, when he felt an abrupt conviction that he was no longer alone. He turned swiftly, and saw that Edith was sitting in the arm-chair that was drawn close to the dead fire.

For a full minute he sat motionless, staring at her. His heart seemed to cease beating, and there was a suffocating pain in his throat. Then he rose from his chair, trembling. She did not turn her head, but remained in an attitude that was intensely characteristic—leaning forward and holding out both hands towards the dead embers. Even when he

made a step towards her she did not move. He gave a stifled cry, and then his tumultuous sensations found relief in grotesque commonplace.

“Edith! How on earth did you come in?” he said falteringly, absurdly. He was perfectly convinced that she was there in the flesh; he had always scoffed at the spiritualism in which she believed. She turned her head slowly, and when he saw her eyes he felt a sudden thrill of something not remote from fear. They were strangely large and bright and preternaturally solemn. Then, very gradually, she disappeared, fading to a thin mist which kept her shape until his eyes could discern it no longer. He uttered a cry and held out his hands. “Come back, come back!” he groaned. For a moment the mist returned, showing him the dim mirage of her face; then it vanished completely.

He walked with uncertain steps to his desk and sat there with his head resting on his hands. For some time the shock produced by the apparition seemed to have slain all his power of thought, but gradually he recovered his self-control and was able to regard the staggering event from a rational standpoint. Of course it was the result of a

morbid condition of his own brain; it was one of those hallucinations which he had formerly believed to afflict only persons neurotic to the verge of imbecility; it was a definite warning from Nature that he was succumbing to the influence of a fixed idea. Yet why, since it was merely a composite image of his idea of Edith, had there been that strange expression in its eyes—an expression which, as he now realised, had been absolutely different from any aspect of the real Edith? It had a beauty that was wholly unearthly; it had awakened in him, he felt, a breathless sense of awe. He meditated over this problem for a long while, and then, suddenly, the mystery became clear. The vision which he had seen was not merely a composite image of his idea of her personality; it was the presentment of his own ideal, of all that he had imagined her to be since he had lost her. Certainly this theory was not precisely flattering to the real Edith, but it accounted excellently for the strange and splendid perfection of the apparition. He watched the chair by the fireplace for several hours, and at frequent intervals he made violent efforts to will the return of the phantom, but without any success. He even

went to his desk and, sitting in the exact attitude which had been his when the vision arrived, tried to fall into the train of thought which had preceded that appearance. This, too, proved fruitless; and at last, feeling utterly worn out by a long and nerve-wracking vigil, he went to bed. Just before he turned out the light, he took up Edith's photograph and looked at it closely. He had not been wrong; the vision had been absolutely different,—more dignified, more gracious, finer in every respect. The photograph reproduced with great fidelity Edith's characteristic air of slightly sophisticated *gaminerie*; there had been no trace of that in the grave and splendid eyes of the phantom. He put down the photograph, and realised next moment with a thrill of almost guilty surprise that he had been wondering how he should feel if now, after this amazing event, the other Edith, the one whom he had regarded as the real Edith, came back to him. Would she be the real Edith any more?

IV.

She returned next day, the phantom Edith, at almost the same time in the evening. He was sitting at his desk when he again became conscious of her presence, and turning, he saw her in the arm-chair by the fire. There was a loud singing in his ears and a burning pain in his temples, but he felt perfectly calm. Since she was merely, he thought, the creation of his own brain, it was probable that by a strong effort of will he could prevent her from disappearing, for a while at any rate. He remained rigidly quiet, watching her.

She sat in the same attitude that she had taken on the previous day, curved towards the fire, which was burning brightly. He noticed that against the flames her fingers seemed opaque, or, at any rate, not more transparent than a delicate human hand. She wore a black dress which he did not know, and this seemed to him remarkable; apparently he possessed the power of inventing new clothes for her as well as a new expression. Her face was strangely sad, and thinner than he had ever known it. It was not pale, however, but had the rich colour that he remembered so

well. As he gazed at her, he was more and more astonished at the wonderful completeness of the hallucination; she was no dim wraith, but apparently a tangible creature of flesh and blood; her clothes were actual in every detail; he looked in vain for any sign that his imagination had failed; he could even see the rise and fall of her breast as she breathed. He was visited by an almost overwhelming desire to rush to her and take her in his arms, but he managed to restrain himself, remembering that on the previous day she had begun to vanish as soon as he moved.

He had watched her, it seemed to him, for half an hour before she turned her face slowly towards him. During that time he was conscious of a deep sensation of peace, an ineffable pleasure in being near to her, in contemplating her new, tranquil loveliness. When she turned she seemed to look through rather than at him, as if he were the spirit and she the blind mortal; her eyes were again widely open and darkly unfathomable; her lips were parted slightly. The sad beauty of that exquisite face thrilled him like perfect music; he leant towards it slowly, staring into those mysterious eyes, and then his

self-control broke down; he flung himself towards her, crying her name, groping with feverish hands. In a moment she vanished, leaving him kneeling on the floor and clutching the empty air.

Several minutes passed before he rose, and went slowly to his chair, pressing his hands to his throbbing temples. He sat down, feeling absolutely bewildered, and wondering if madness were indeed come upon him. Only an instant had passed between his sudden movement and the disappearance of the phantom, but he was certain that during the instant his hands had touched a living body, that there was warm breath in the lips which had almost met his own. If this was another hallucination, it implied a serious condition of mental disorder; he remembered his old theory that people who believed in the materialisation of spirits usually died mad. The thing had gone too far; he must adopt strong measures to fight a malady that was nothing but the result of ill-health and trouble; he must destroy his fixed idea, But could he destroy it? The thought of the face which had touched his own made his brain reel; he was assailed with a succession of acute nervous tremors, and felt

wretchedly weak. To banish that, even if its banishment were in his power,—would life be worth living without it?

In the cold light of morning, however, the strange event seemed to have a distinctly morbid aspect; he felt tired and ill, and resolved to avoid, if possible, any repetition of the experience for several days. He went for long walks and shunned his room during the hours of early evening, returning late at night when he was thoroughly sleepy. His health very soon improved, and though his heart was heavy with the old trouble, he no longer felt the intolerable yearning which, no doubt, had produced the hallucination. Indeed, as he became more healthy in body and mind, the whole affair seemed to him most unpleasantly abnormal, and he began actually to dread its recurrence. More than once, as he ascended the stairs, he felt that the phantom might be in his room, and he went out again and tramped the streets until he was half-dead with fatigue. Gradually, however, the dread that he was haunted became rarer, and at length he was able to enter his room without a thrill of the heart. It was only when he was possessed by a definite conviction of the apparition having

left him for ever that he began, almost unconsciously, to desire that it should reappear. The real Edith, meanwhile, had not answered his letter.

About a fortnight later he returned to his house at night, after being haunted all day by an indefinable sense of uneasiness which drove him to tramp many miles of pavement. As soon as he entered his room, where the single gas jet was turned low, he realised that some one was in it; but a firm conviction that the intruder was a living person seemed in some strange way to exclude all fear that his hallucination had returned. Then, next moment, a wave of terrifying ecstasy seemed to sweep over him, leaving him trembling and gasping for breath; he fell back against the wall. In the dim light he saw her cross the room swiftly, silently, then she was in his arms; her hair touched his brow, her breath was on his face; he could feel her hands pressed hard upon his breast. He drew her close and kissed her warm lips again and again. . . .

Afterwards, he supposed, he fainted, for several hours later he found himself lying on the floor in the empty room. An intense languor oppressed him; he was only able to

drag himself to his bedroom and to lie down, fully clothed, on his bed. He fell instantly into profound sleep.

V.

Next morning he awoke very late; and lay for some time drowsily wondering why he was so tired. Then, as memory of the night's event returned, he felt real terror, and rose, hoping that the act of dressing would dissipate some part of his gloomy forebodings. It was plain, he thought, that he was in imminent danger of losing his reason; the old obsession had returned, tremendously reinforced; even in that commonplace hour of morning he felt that his power of resistance had gone; and in spite of his conviction that it would kill him, or do worse, he felt that the desire for a repetition of his last experience was smouldering at the back of his brain, ready to blaze forth at any moment in fatal flame. There was only one thing that could save him, and that one thing was, apparently, impossible.

Yet it was characteristic of his strange

capacity for wavering that, when he went downstairs and saw a letter from Edith lying on the table, he began to wonder if, in the event of her relenting, a life spent with her whilst the memory, or even the actual presence, of the ideal Edith was haunting him, would not be worse than his present condition. How trivial her chatter would seem after the silence of the phantom that spoke only with those most eloquent eyes ; how should he endure her pertness, her frivolity, when his ideal was near him, the beautiful wraith that had her physical aspect, but was yet so different, so far aloof ? With a great effort he broke from the coil of such thoughts, and told himself that he must regard the affair from Edith's point of view ; that it was his gentlemanly duty to obey her if she wished him to return, and to try to make her happy. Then he opened the letter.

It contained only a few lines. Edith, it seemed, had been ill ; she was better, and thanked him for writing. She would like to see him ; until they had met he must understand that she could decide nothing. Would he come that afternoon ?

He put down the letter and stared out of

the window for several minutes; then he wrote a telegram and rang for his servant. He felt a thrill of excitement when the message had gone, but this was succeeded very soon by a strange sense of guilt. It actually seemed to him that he had been false to the lovely soul of his ideal, and he dreaded the moment when he should meet Edith, and realise the difference, the ghastly difference.

She kept him waiting for some time in the sitting-room of her little flat—the Bachelor Woman's flat—and when, at last, she appeared, she was very pale, and her face was thinner than when they had parted. He noticed that she kept her eyes turned away from his own. As he looked at her a great pity overwhelmed him. Poor girl, poor girl! if only she had written before this change had happened in his life! She sat down by the fire with her back almost turned to him, and stared into the grate. The sight of her in this attitude afflicted him oddly; a burning memory of the other, the ideal, returned to him, and made him feel that it was all impossible, that he could never live with this Edith; that madness, if it were indeed madness, would be prefer-

able. But he made a last immense effort, and began to say what he conceived to be the right thing, the gentlemanly thing. She listened for some time and then she interrupted him.

"Don't say any more," she said. "I understand."

He echoed the last word.

"Oh yes, I see it all," she said. "You ought not to have written. You were lonely, and made the mistake of thinking that you wanted me. You've realised it now, but feel that you can't tell me."

He attempted to protest. She interrupted him again.

"I know exactly what has happened," she said; "I *feel* it. Since you wrote you have met some one else."

At this he could not restrain a startled exclamation. She moved her hands with a quick, convulsive gesture. "It's true, isn't it?" she said.

He did not answer for several moments.

"Yes," he said, "it's true in a sense. But it wasn't any one real," he went on. "It was—I can't explain. You wouldn't understand; you would think I was mad."

She stared at the fire; he saw with amazement that she had begun to tremble.

"Who was it?" she asked in an almost inaudible voice.

He made a feeble attempt at a laugh. "You'll say it's absurd," he said. "I suppose I was ill or mad. It was a hallucination—a spirit, if you like. It came again and again, and now—"

"Well?" she said.

"It's grown more real to me than anything in the world. Of course it's absurd. Any doctor would tell you so. But to me it's a fact; a fact in—in flesh and blood."

He blurted out the last words with extraordinary emphasis. She shivered violently.

"Flesh and blood!" she cried. Then she turned to him, and for the first time he saw her eyes closely. The sight made his heart stop beating for what seemed an age; he stared at her with wild amazement, and all power of speech seemed to leave him. At last he uttered a strangled kind of cry.

"Why, it was you!" he said. "It was you all the time!"

She looked at him solemnly without speaking. Then she nodded very slowly. He sprang up and went to her.

"What is it? What has happened? You've changed! There's something quite

new——" he gasped. There was wild wonder in his eyes. He attempted to take her hands; she pointed to a chair.

"Wait," she said. "Let us find out all the truth about this. How many times did it happen?"

She was trembling still, but her voice was calm. He sat down in the chair.

"Three times," he answered. "Twice at half-past six and once at night." He paused for a moment. "The last time was last night," he said in a low voice. She turned abruptly towards the fire. He uttered another cry. "Why, that's the very dress that you wore!" he almost shouted.

"Listen," she said. "I'm going to tell you something that you may believe or not as you like; to me it is absolute truth. Twice, when I was very tired, I went to sleep in the evening, and woke up to find myself sitting with you in Barton Street. Each time I felt like a spirit. I saw myself and you dimly, as one sees people sometimes in dreams; but the last time——" She broke off suddenly. "It's extraordinary, it's extraordinary!" she said. "And the strangest part of it all is that you seemed different from what you used to be, and to-day you seem

different still. And you feel that about me, don't you?"

He nodded. Then he rose and took her hands. "Did I seem worse than ever?" he asked gently.

She smiled. "No," she answered. "Only—well, different."

Then he knelt beside her. "Dear," he said, "don't you think that we aren't really different—that we weren't different when we met in that wonderful way—but that we have each found out the other's real self? At any rate, I found out yours—found out that it is far finer than my stupid idea of it in the old days. If you feel anything of the same kind about me, there's obviously only one thing to be done. We can't, you know," he concluded, "continue to haunt one another for the rest of our lives."

"No, I suppose not," said Edith. "It would be very inconvenient."

So, for once, the ideals of two persons were actually realised. It seems a pity that neither of them, after being granted such a truly magnificent experience, should take any further interest in spiritualism. Perhaps they are too happy to worry about

what is, at best, a nerve-wracking business. Edith, at any rate, is most materially concerned with babies. Her husband is once again a sceptic, though he is ready to admit that even the wisest and best of men may become the dupe of their own hallucinations, and that no estimate can be too high of the *rapport* that exists between all true lovers. At intervals he is still worried by a doubt as to whether he was faithful or wholly treacherous to Edith during that strange time. Concerning this the initiated shall decide.

TWO GROTESQUES

TWO GROTESQUES.

I.

HISTORY OF RIDOLFO.

RIDOLFO's father began life low down in the soap trade, but subsequently rose to great eminence in politics, and invested his money wisely. He was regarded as a real statesman by the more enthusiastic members of his Party, and conspired with bishops against the disestablishment of Churches in countries which did not want them. He married a daughter of the Earl of Llanpumpsaint, and Ridolfo was their only child.

From his earliest years Ridolfo was blessed with an almost miraculous sense of class-distinctions and an equally vivid conviction of his own importance in the scheme of his

Creator. Indeed, when he was only three years old, and was compelled by force to attend a reception given by his father to the school children of his constituency, he smiled benignantly at the little ones when they stood in a group and raised the war-song of the Primrose League; but when they were brought up to him one by one, he put out his tongue at them, and informed them, in the *patois* of the nursery, that they were dirty little brats. At the age of six he knew the difference between a marchioness and a countess, and was cold to the latter if the former were present; and at twelve, when he went to his public school, he was the most accomplished little snob that ever wore Eton collars.

He had not been there many days, however, before the behaviour of the masters and the conversations of the boys made him realise that he was breathing an atmosphere in which a new standard of values held good. Important persons, instead of being dukes and marchionesses, owed their eminence to the fact either that they were athletic heroes, or that they had a great deal of pocket-money and lordly palaces where one went to stay during the holidays. Ridolfo cultivated the acquaintance

of these celebrities with artistic care. Beginning with those of lesser importance, he rapidly ascended the social scale; and as he was moderately athletic, and had a father who was on the way to becoming a great man, and a mother who wore a coronet at the Coronation, he experienced no great difficulty in the glorious task which he had set himself to accomplish. It is true that certain rude athletes resolutely refused to become intimate with him, and that quiet and scholarly boys disliked his conversation; but as these misguided persons were usually the sons of colonels or clergymen whose names seldom or never appeared in the papers, or suffered transmutation to something new and strange in the Birthday Honours, they really did not matter to Ridolfo. Nor did he commit the vulgar error of hunting for popularity; essentially an aristocrat, he held that friendships should be few but firm, and should follow by careful substitution rather than by additions which were apt to make social existence complicated. His theory of life was well expressed by the poet who wrote—

“I hold it true with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men should rise on stepping-stones
Of their best friends to higher things.”

Therefore when Ridolfo, through his intimacy with the Honourable Bill Crossbones, had grown acquainted with his elder brother the Earl of Hatchment, and had realised that the patrician charm of a younger son was more highly developed in the heir to an earldom, he became a valuable friend to Hatchment, who disliked his brother, and he dropped the Honourable Bill like a hot potato. This was the one error in his career, for Hatchment, shortly afterwards, succumbed to a surfeit of green apples and sardines, and the Honourable Bill became heir, and remained cold to Ridolfo's subsequent advances for some time.

Long before he had left school, Ridolfo became an adept in the art of judiciously avoiding persons whom he had known intimately, but whose further acquaintance a wider knowledge of the world taught him would be useless and indeed detrimental to his career. Of course he did not commit the error of actually cutting them unless they had turned out to be hopelessly humble, unpopular, or unfortunate; usually he passed them with a bright smile and a nod when he was in the company that he had chosen, but if he met them alone he became his old

delightful self, and very soon made them begin to suspect that his coldness existed only in their imaginations. Such procedure was easy enough at school, but when he went to the University of Oxford he found that his task became more delicate; young men who had acquiesced in his desire that they should drop into the background became suddenly prominent, and appeared to imagine that they were once again on terms of equality with him. Ridolfo realised very soon that there was only one mode of treatment for these tactless dolts; he began to cut them in the street. In order to convince the world of his impartiality, he chose the former Honourable Bill, now Lord Hatchment, as his first subject, and when that august personage, who had advanced towards him with outstretched hand, stood staring at him blankly as he moved majestically away, he realised for the first time that cutting people was not merely a duty that one owed to one's career; it was an active, healthy pleasure. Very soon he was engaged in cutting all his old schoolfellows except a small and select band who were persons of the utmost promise; then he cut nearly all the undergraduates of his College; then the Dons; and

when at last he cut the Master of the same society in the High Street, he felt that there was nothing in the world to compare with the delight of possessing a truly eclectic spirit. He bought a University Calendar and marked off all the men whom he had decided to avoid ; whole colleges came under the ban of his ostracism, and by the end of his second year he was able to reflect with honest pride that his system had worked admirably ; he did not possess a single friend who was not titled or celebrated or rich or influential. So magnificent were the finest of his habitual companions that he was compelled from time to time to cast off the less glorious among his intimates, but he always managed to concoct a very good reason for doing so. When Beery de Lancey de Vere (his real Christian name was Adolphus) suddenly gave up hunting and waistcoats and took to Socialism and a red tie, Ridolfo, realising that Beery's friendship would be of no use to him in politics, engaged him in theological argument, and afterwards went about declaring that Beery had been a good fellow but was now an atheist and impossible as a friend. Beery was in reality no more an atheist than Ridolfo was a Christian, but Ridolfo's attitude created a

great impression and won him the friendship of two evangelical peers and a bishop.

Although Ridolfo had cut the Dons who set his papers, he took a good class in the schools, and became private secretary to his uncle the second Earl of Llanpumpsaint, who was afterwards so terribly mangled by the militant suffragists. Ridolfo's rooms in Half-Moon Street were the meeting-place of the most brilliant young stalwarts of his Party; he joined a club which had a great reputation for blackballing baronets, and found it unnecessary to cut more than twenty of the members. Thenceforward his career was amazingly successful; he married his cousin, the heiress of Llanpumpsaint, and, as one of the most active opponents of every form of progress, was a great success in the first Parliament of this century. He cut pro-Boers, Church Disestablishers, Nonconformists, Catholics, Socialists, Mr Belloc, Mr Bernard Shaw, Mr Lloyd George, Mr Keir Hardie, but not Mr Winston Churchill and Lord Rosebery, both of whom he regarded as men with a future. Of course by this time he had soared into regions far above those inhabited by the friends of his boyhood and adolescence, and when he met any of these lowly persons he showed no signs of

remembering them. He became intensely hated, but the haters, he knew, had no power to thwart his career, and the pleasure of ignoring every one who fell below his superlative standard became more and more intoxicating. In 1908 he cut his paternal uncle, in 1909 his father-in-law, and in 1910 his father, who had behaved like a very great fool over the Old Age Pension question. It was not until 1911, however, that people began to think something was wrong. Ridolfo, at a public banquet, ostentatiously ignored the Leader of his own Party. Now the Leader was not only the most charming person in England; he possessed a great deal of influence, and no one could understand the reason of Ridolfo's action. Ridolfo did not trouble to explain that for several years he had been irritated by the fact that no one had ever cut the Leader, and had lusted after this unique achievement. The melancholy climax came soon afterwards: Ridolfo, after cutting all his friends, his valet, his butler, his mistress, and lastly his wife, went to a reception at which a Very Exalted Personage was present. He began operations by cutting his hostess; this might have passed for absence of mind; but soon afterwards the Very Exalted Personage saw him,

and advancing with the genial smile of Royalty, extended his hand. Ridolfo cut him dead.

Ridolfo is now in a luxurious private asylum. He cuts the matron, the doctors, the nurses, the visitors, and the patients. The only person to whom he will condescend to speak is a half-witted old man who is usually employed in carting dung. Ridolfo, in his earlier days, was an agnostic, but there is no doubt that his views have changed and that he regards this aged imbecile as a kind of Supreme Being. He gives no trouble, and walks about the garden for most of the day with his eyes fixed on the sky. Visitors to the asylum are always greatly impressed by the superhuman majesty of his deportment.

II.

JEMIMA IN HEAVEN.

Miss Jemima Smith was a spinster, and I am afraid that no one found the fact strange. She was stringy and bony and tough; and though she performed a great number of charitable exercises, she had an

air of inquisitorial virtue that chilled her beneficiaries to their marrows. Very early in her life she had made up her mind about everything in Heaven or on earth, and she gave the erring and straying sojourners on the latter planet a very uncomfortable time whenever she met them. She wore a coal-scuttle bonnet and elastic-sided boots, and she delivered lectures on hygienics in a dark mission - room where people caught influenza.

Miss Julia Smith was a very different person. Although she bore the same famous name she was unrelated to Miss Jemima,—as that lady would frequently proclaim with something like a snort. Miss Julia was also addicted to the performance of charitable acts, though you would hardly have suspected it when you looked at her. She wore bright clothes and large hats, and her boots never had elastic sides. She had the jolliest face imaginable, and she was always laughing and making quite amusing jokes; in fact, she enjoyed life immensely. Every one liked her except Miss Jemima, who shook her head whenever she was mentioned, and said that she had no talent for organisation. Children adored her, and she

returned the compliment; her house was always full of all shapes and sizes of them, and she taught them wonderful games and told them beautiful stories, and allowed them (said Miss Jemima) to behave like little savage heathens. She was perfectly splendid with sick people, and unlucky people, and crushed and cowed people; merely to look at her face and to hear her laugh would make a Trappist monk feel jolly, and though she was no good at organisation she had a natural tact in dealing with all kinds of people that was just as useful. In short, she was a perfectly delightful person, and I can think of no one in the world with a charm equal to hers, except Miss Ellen Terry, whom she strongly resembled. And if this is impertinence, I don't care.

Now it befell that, in the town which was adorned by the presence of these two illustrious ladies, a grievous pestilence arose owing to the pettifogging behaviour of the Town Councillors about a poisonous sewer. Many persons died (but none of the Town Councillors, for they unanimously agreed to migrate as soon as the epidemic began), and the children of the place especially suffered. Miss Jemima and Miss Julia toiled

among the sick with equal devotion, if not with equal success; Miss Jemima never shirked a duty, and Miss Julia, even in the midst of suffering, could not help being happy in having an overwhelming amount of work to do. They nursed and visited and organised and consoled for three weeks, and at the end of that time, when the plague had abated, they both fell ill.

Observe another instance of the senseless ingratitude of humanity, and of its total incapacity to appreciate patient merit when its eyes have been dazzled by radiant personal charm. Every one went to inquire about Miss Julia, and sent her flowers, and soups, and tracts, and patent medicines, but only a faithful few troubled their heads about poor Miss Jemima, who was really extremely ill. Miss Jemima pretended not to feel aggrieved at this neglect, and when her confidential maid gave her a full account of all the gifts offered by the townsfolk to Miss Julia she snorted as loudly as her debilitated condition permitted, and said that some people had a mania for currying favour with fools. But in reality she was deeply resentful of her rival's success, and brooded over it continually. Nothing, she

reflected, went unrewarded except real merit; and as the reports of Miss Julia's triumphs reached her day by day, she began to form a resolution that as soon as she recovered she would no longer devote herself to the ungrateful human species, but would found a colony of cats, and lavish on them all her formerly misplaced affections.

Everything, indeed, seemed to go wrong with poor Miss Jemima. On the very day when the doctor had pronounced her out of danger, a nasty rude man in a flying machine whizzed over her house and frightened her terribly; her morning paper, as soon as she was once again able to read, informed her that her favourite bishop had abolished wax-lights on the altar and taken to playing hockey; and lastly, when she really seemed quite well, she died and went to Heaven and then came back again on the same day. At least, Miss Jemima stoutly asserts that this happened; unsympathetic and material persons hold that she was merely the dupe of a strange dream. Dream or reality, the experience, though unpleasant and even alarming, had a most salutary effect on Miss Jemima's character.

One afternoon, whilst she was sadly reading an account of the exploits of Miss Julia in the parish magazine (which was a fraud, for it consisted of two outside sheets, written by the vicar, that masked a tedious periodical called 'Joyful Tidings,' the work of professional religious writers), she became conscious that she was growing remarkably cold and stiff. She dropped the stately prose of the vicar and attempted to sit up in bed, but a moment later she fell back unconscious. She was not, I am informed by the curate, the only person to whom the vicar's classic periods had brought oblivion, but she was certainly the first who passed directly from his lists of births, deaths, marriages and churchings - of - women to contemplate a celestial scene.

She was aroused from her slumber or swoon by a mighty, roaring sound, which became louder every moment, and at length seemed to remain stationary outside her window. She peered over the edge of the bedclothes, and perceived that a large aeroplane was moving backwards and forwards in front of her house. In it sat a personage of most unusual exterior. He wore no goggles and no leather suit; his head was

bare, and he was clad only in a skimpy and diaphanous white robe. The aeroplane suddenly ceased to roar, and the personage addressed Miss Jemima.

"I am instructed to call for Miss J. Smith of this town," he said. "Please be quick," he added. "You needn't bring a bag. You will find everything that you want when you arrive."

Miss Jemima, to her own amazement, found herself arising from her bed and marching firmly to the window, clad merely in blamelessness and a long night-gown.

"Pray, what does all this mean?" she demanded.

"It means," said the aeronaut with slight impatience, "that your hour has come. This," he added, indicating the aeroplane, "is the Car of Death."

"And a very good name for it too," snapped Miss Jemima; "nasty, break-neck things! You won't find me inside it, I can assure you."

"You will find yourself there, at any rate," said the aeronaut cheerfully. And even as he spoke, Miss Jemima was conscious of being wafted like a dead leaf towards the window. She made a futile attempt to resist. "Mercy! what does this mean?" she cried.

"I told you that your hour had come," said the aeronaut with weary patience. And just at that moment Miss Jemima looked back at her bed and saw herself lying there white and rigid.

"Do you mean that I'm dead?" she cried. The aeronaut nodded. "That's what you are pleased to call it on earth," he answered.

"And I have to go in that thing?" shrieked Miss Jemima. The aeronaut bowed silently.

"Well, I never!" said Miss Jemima. "Young man," she went on after a moment, "before I trust myself to you, I insist on hearing where you imagine that you are going to take me."

"To Heaven, if you don't mind," answered the aeronaut.

"Heaven? That is quite satisfactory," said Miss Jemima. "But how am I to know that you won't drop me on the way?"

"You will be perfectly safe," said the aeronaut. "You couldn't fall out if you tried. The laws of gravity no longer apply to you."

"That sounds scarcely respectable," said Miss Jemima. "May I ask what your name is?"

"My name is Death," said the aeronaut.

Miss Jemima uttered a faint cry. "Come, madam," said the aeronaut, familiarly but kindly; "you have faced me without flinching for the sake of others on many occasions in your life; you surely are not going to show fear now?"

"Not I!" cried Miss Jemima, tossing her head, and next moment she was seated behind Death in the aeroplane. "Mind you drive carefully, Mr Death," she said.

Concerning the details of the voyage, Miss Jemima remembered very little except that, as soon as the aeroplane was in motion, a thick darkness descended upon them, and the roaring of the engine made her deaf to all other sound. Though she only wore her night-gown she was not cold, and she noticed that the white robe of Death never once fluttered in the wind. For a while she felt a queer kind of yearning after the body which she had left, but this sensation soon passed away. After they had travelled at immense speed for what seemed to her a very long time, she became conscious of a tiny point of light, like a star, in the blackness in front of them. This point increased in size very slowly, until at last it had swelled to a wonderful rosy dawn which

overspread the sky like an immense flower. Its loveliness was amazing, and Miss Jemima gazed at it with enchanted eyes.

“Well, I call that pretty!” she said.

Not long afterwards, when the rosy light was all round her, she saw that the aeroplane was approaching a land that was dim with mist, and presently the aeronaut let it descend gently on a kind of quay of white and green marble. Jemima looked about the quay, but saw no one, and felt slightly disappointed, for she had expected an enthusiastic reception. As she floated out of the aeroplane, however, a large old gentleman with a white beard appeared suddenly in front of her. He seemed benevolent, but slightly worried, and waved a huge sheet of paper fussily.

“Yes, yes! Who is it now?” he demanded.

“Miss J. Smith,” explained the aeronaut, and Miss Jemima favoured the old gentleman with one of her sharp nods. The old gentleman ran his finger rapidly down his list, then pressed an electric bell in the wall. Instantly a very handsome and well-developed angel appeared.

“Number eight, B, 42,” said the old gentleman. Then he bowed to Miss Jemima and

vanished. When she looked about her she found that the aeronaut had vanished also. The angel took her hand.

"Where are we off to now?" demanded Jemima.

"We are going," said the angel in a soft voice, "to the special Heaven that is awaiting you." Miss Jemima felt flattered.

"Do I have a special Heaven?" she asked.

"Yes," replied the angel. "Every one has." Jemima felt a slight disappointment. "Every one," continued the angel, "has a Heaven arranged according to their record and their ideals on earth. Your career was remarkable because of the good works that you performed amongst the sick and the needy; you will find your Heaven absolutely suited to all your tastes, and peopled by those whom you loved and helped on earth."

"Oh!" said Jemima, looking very much astonished. "I hope some of them will have learnt to wash their faces. And, you know," she went on, "I assure you that I didn't love all those whom I helped. Quite the contrary. But I've a sense of duty."

The angel frowned. "A sense of duty is all nonsense," he said. "Our instructions tell

us that you loved every one you met. I trust that the voyage here has not had some strange effect upon your temper."

Jemima shrugged her shoulders and sniffed, deciding privately that the angel was inclined to give himself airs. Meanwhile they were walking, or rather gliding, through a great park that was planted with towering trees and bright with a thousand strange flowers, and presently they came to a tall golden gate. The angel produced a key which was labelled *J. Smith* and opened the gate, and Jemima entered. She found herself in a small village, exactly like an old-fashioned country village in England, set in the midst of fields where many persons were congregated, some in white raiment and some in no raiment at all. As soon as these persons perceived Jemima, they began to run towards her. Jemima recognised most of them at once; they all came from the town where she had passed her life in piety and exhortation. But when they were quite near, she saw a face at the back of the group which had been hidden from her, and then she turned to the angel.

"This won't do," she said firmly. "I can't stay here."

“Why not?” asked the angel, with a smile. Jemima became excited.

“I don’t want to be uncharitable,” she said, “but really you can’t expect me to meet that girl. She was my housemaid, and the less said about her the better. Why, I do declare she has actually the effrontery to go about carrying her baby!”

“Why not?” said the angel. “Heaven wouldn’t be Heaven to her without it. I’m afraid you haven’t quite grasped the way in which things are managed up here.”

“But she wasn’t married!” cried Jemima.

“Tut-tut,” said the angel, gracefully repressing a yawn. “At any rate, she was a devoted mother. Probably she is here on that account.”

“You can’t be a mother unless you’re married,” said Miss Jemima firmly.

“I have so little experience of these matters,” said the angel apologetically. “But perhaps some of the other people will please you more.”

“They don’t please me at all,” said Jemima. “I see those dirty little ragamuffins who used to throw stones outside my house, and old Dick the poacher, and the horrid man who went about with a barrel-organ and a

monkey, and the blind fiddler who used to drink too much beer. Really, it seems as if some one had purposely collected all the reprobates of the place for my benefit. I call it perfectly insulting!"

She spoke with extreme vehemence. The angel looked at her with a perplexed air. "I'm afraid there must be something wrong," he said.

"Wrong!" cried Miss Jemima—"I should think it *is* wrong! I must say that I never expected this kind of thing."

"Let me explain," said the angel. "This is the place where all noble earthly ideals are realised. This poor girl's ideal was to love her child eternally, to keep it always with her. Yours was to direct all these poor people, and unlucky people, and weak people to Heaven. You see the realisation of all this before you; doesn't that fill you with an immense and permanent joy?"

Jemima was about to utter a tart response, when her glance fell on first one and then another of the faces around her. Each of them wore a wonderful expression of mingled peace and happiness; they were strangely transfigured from their earthly aspect, and

shone towards her like the faces of friends. No one had ever before regarded poor Miss Jemima in that way, and she felt a sudden and almost painful thrill at her heart, as if something icy which hemmed it in had melted. Next moment, to her own amazement, she found herself running with outstretched hands towards the girl who had been her housemaid, and she persists in asserting that she had every intention of kissing Dick the poacher. This affecting scene, however, was prevented by the sudden appearance of the old man with a white beard, who seemed to be in a state of considerable excitement.

“There’s been a mistake!” he cried. “It’s all the fault of Death. This is the hundredth time that he’s brought the wrong person.”

Jemima’s heart sank into her bare toes. Here she was, she told herself, just beginning to feel all the joys of Heaven, and to yearn for the society of these dear people whom she had shrunk from only a few moments before, and now this stupid old man had come to spoil everything.

“What’s the matter?” she demanded gloomily.

“A bad mistake,” reiterated the old man.

“Madam, you must go away. This is not your Heaven; it belongs to another Miss Smith,—to Miss Julia Smith, who is now on her way here. It all comes of that wretched secretary not taking the trouble to write out names in full.”

“Julia!” cried Jemima. “Is she in Heaven too?” But at this moment the door flew open and in rushed Miss Julia, radiant, laughing, an entirely adorable figure.

“*Dear* people, this *is* delightful!” she cried, kissing her hands to the housemaid and the children and Dick the poacher. Then she ran straight to Jemima. “I’m so glad to see you, you dear thing!” she cried. “And I’ve heard all about it—the mistake, I mean, and I absolutely insist that you stay here with me. Heaven won’t be Heaven without you. You will stay? That’s right; that’s all settled. And now I can talk to *all* my friends!”

But the old gentleman with the beard looked very grave. “I’m afraid that can’t be done,” he said. “Your idea of Heaven never contained Miss Jemima, and Miss Jemima’s idea never included you. Miss Jemima must go away.”

“What, are you going to send me back to

earth?" cried Miss Jemima, clutching Miss Julia's arm, which was round her waist. The old man smiled.

"Things are not as bad as all that," he answered. "But you must go to your own Heaven, which is full of all your earthly ideals. It is not such a bad Heaven, really," added the old man. "I have seen many worse."

"We shall come to see you often!" said Miss Julia, kissing Jemima. Then the angel touched Jemima's shoulder, and she was conscious of being wafted away from that happy scene. She felt strongly inclined to weep.

In a very short time they came to another gate, which the angel opened with a key that the old man had given to him. As soon as they had entered Jemima glanced round her, and saw that, compared with Miss Julia's Heaven, her own was indeed a barren spot. There were no flowers and bright meadows; there was no pleasant village; but instead, there were platforms where grim personages made long and dreary speeches, and a church, from the door of which came the strains of melancholy hymns and psalms about Hell; and a great quantity

of well-ordered soup-kitchens and charity organisation committee-rooms. The whole place smelt powerfully of disinfectants. Jemima observed it all with dismay, yet she was conscious that if it had been on earth and she had been still alive she would have loved it. A few dim and gloomy persons were walking slowly to and fro near her; they had a strangely spectral aspect, and she demanded the reason of this peculiarity.

"I suppose," answered the angel, "that when you were on earth you didn't really care much for people, but only for things. The committee-rooms and disinfectants are real enough, and the hymns and speeches never stop. It's all right, of course; but it's a pity you didn't think more about sunshine and pleasant sights. I find it distinctly chilly and depressing. And that kind of thing, for instance, is insisted on rather too much." He pointed to several of the buildings, which bore on their front the words DUTY AND JUSTICE and ETERNAL PUNISHMENT in large letters. "Duty and Justice are excellent words," said the angel, "but I rather think that our enthusiastic friend, from whom we have lately parted,

would sometimes have written Joy and Mercy instead of them."

As he finished speaking, one of the persons who had been walking up and down approached Miss Jemima. She recognised him as a curate for whom she had always cherished a profound admiration, regarding him, indeed, as a saint on earth. He had not changed at all; he smiled at her mournfully, rolled his eyes, and uttered some sepulchral words that seemed meaningless. In former days she had been always greatly impressed by this performance, but now she felt merely irritated. He was followed by a fat grocer who had been a violent teetotal advocate; she was always overcome by this gentleman's eloquence and would never believe that he put sand in his sugar, as was the fact. Now, however, she detested his whole aspect, and saw the hypocrisy in his little watery eyes.

"He oughtn't to be here," she said to the angel.

"He doesn't want to be," explained the angel. "His right place is somewhere else. But as he was a hypocrite in life he has no real identity, and is bound to appear where a stronger personality than his own wishes to see him."

"I don't wish to see him," said Jemima; and immediately she had spoken the fat grocer vanished with a little click, like a bursting bubble. "And I don't want the curate," added Jemima. The curate also disappeared. Jemima raised her fist in the air. "I don't want any of it," she cried violently. "It isn't a Heaven at all. I've realised now what Heaven ought to be like. When I was on earth I was an idiot. Julia was the only person who had any sense."

As soon as she had spoken, the committee-rooms and the soup-kitchens and the church and the persons who were making speeches all vanished with a faint but audible series of reports, and Miss Jemima and the angel were left standing in the midst of chaos.

"You've done it now!" said the angel.

"I don't care!" said Jemima. "I'm glad! I'll go back to Julia."

"You can't do that!" the angel cried. He stood for some moments looking at Jemima. "Really, this is very perplexing," he said. "No one has ever behaved in that way before. You have placed me in a very awkward position, Jemima; I do think you might have put up with the curate and all the rest of them."

"Smug knaves!" cried Jemima, who felt strangely elated, and was actually enjoying the angel's embarrassment. At this moment the old gentleman appeared once again.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded testily.

The angel explained. "And it really seems," he concluded, "as if there's no place where she *can* go!"

"There's no place where I want to go," said Jemima, "unless I can go to Julia and all her delightful young friends. If you can't allow that you had better send me back to earth. Then I can live as Julia lived, and come to her kind of Heaven when I die."

The old man looked at the angel.

"It's unusual," said the old man. "In fact, it's almost startling; but it's not a bad idea. Her presence here whilst she is in this transitional state would really be very embarrassing. And the aeroplane is at the door."

"Suppose we call Death," suggested the angel.

A moment later Death stood among them. He was very much annoyed, at first, to hear that he had made a journey for nothing; but ultimately he admitted that he ought to have been more careful, and that Jemima really

had a legitimate right to go back to earth if she found Heaven unsuitable to her present condition. The old man and the angel embraced Jemima, and she floated gracefully into the back seat of the aeroplane.

“Home!” said Jemima calmly, just as if she were the wife of the Mayor leaving a Mothers’ Meeting.

She awoke in her bed half an hour afterwards, but she was quite convinced that her strange journey was real, and not a mere dream. Even when she heard that Miss Julia was still alive her conviction was unshaken. At any rate, the experience, whether it was real or imagined, produced the most remarkable change in her temperament. She recovered from her illness almost immediately, became a close friend to Miss Julia, and forgetting all about Duty and Justice and Eternal Punishment, she devoted the rest of her life to making other people happy. As she was always with Miss Julia, whom she adored, you may imagine what a jolly time she had. She threw away her bonnet and her elastic-sided boots, and gave no more lectures; but she became a great expert in games for children (with whom, indeed, she

romps quite disgracefully), and in cheering the gloomy and inspiriting the feeble and cowed. She looks gay and jovial, and every one wonders why in the world she never married. Miss Julia is more than ever like Miss Ellen Terry; and when she and Miss Jemima return to Heaven, as they obviously will, it is certain that arrangements will have to be made for them to share the same garden. It is equally certain that the curate and the teetotal grocer will not be there.

FRAGMENTS FROM THE DIARY
OF MR SEPTIMUS JERVOISE,
FELLOW OF — COLLEGE.

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June 1st.

FLORENCE once more! I arrived last evening, having travelled without a halt from London, and once again the Fates were kind. There was no rain, the horde of tourists (*quorum pars . . .*) had certainly thinned, and the last fires of a superb sunset died magnificently beyond the purple hills. As I leaned from my window on the Lung' Arno and looked across the tawny water to the homely and well-beloved dome of San Frediano, the memory of my first vision of that incomparable scene came back to me sharply, and with it a faint renewal of my old sensations—the dimness in the eyes and aching at the heart which possessed me as I took my

first deep draught of the wonderful, wistful beauty of an Italian evening. I was in my third year at Oxford (a place which I now think as beautiful as Florence; how I should have scorned such an idea then!), and I had come south at the end of the summer term, in defiance of the warnings of travelled friends, to find a city purged of barbarians and golden all day long. Undergraduates are most rarely rich at the end of the summer term, and it was only by practising strict economy that I was able to stay for three weeks—three weeks of Heaven for a ten-pound note! I remember how selfishly glad I was to be alone, and to discover one lovely aspect of the place after another without owing my perceptions to the indiscreet finger of a companion; I remember I was even glad that I spoke no Italian; my ignorance of all that people around me were saying seemed to emphasise my remoteness from everyday life, and leave me free to think of nothing but beauty. What a time it was, and how one changes in five-and-twenty years! Then I lived in spirit with Dante, with Lorenzo de Medici and Machiavelli, and bitterly resented the banalities of well-meaning parsons and well-informed old ladies; now I find pleasure

in prattling commonplaces both in Italian and English ; I take a lively interest in the fluctuating amenities of hotels, and become restive if I cannot see the *Corriere della Sera* every day. I am, alas ! no longer like the youth of the legend, dumb before a Botticelli, but often grossly argumentative ; in fact, like most middle-aged amateurs, I have grown terribly at ease in Zion, and often detect myself in the act of speaking quite kindly of the gods before whom I was formerly prostrate. I like the modern Italians even when they display a startling ignorance of their own pictures or churches, and I take a benevolent interest in their progressive spirit. I doubt if I would walk three miles in the rain to see a Della Robbia, and I drink tea every afternoon. But though the first fine raptures — the honeymoon ardours — have passed away, they have left behind them a steady affection, a tranquil love of the country, the people, the noble relics, which, one is thankful to think, is far too solid to suffer change. Italy will be my mistress until I die, and as I looked on one of her fairest aspects last evening, whilst the moon rose above San Miniato and a melodious vagabond twanged a guitar below my window, I

felt more than happy in meeting her again after a long separation. I felt also a slight regret that I had promised to visit old Mr Rutherford and listen to more of his eternal lucubrations on Petrarch. Old Mr Rutherford is a delightful person, and so, I suppose, was Petrarch—though I am almost certain that he bored Laura,—but I should prefer to be alone for a few blissful days. However, I promised that I would call at the Villa Valchiusa to-morrow, and I imagine that at the present moment Mr Rutherford is preparing whole battalions of manuscript to parade before me. . . .

June 2nd.

I set out at ten o'clock this morning for the Uffizii, but the sunshine was too delightful, and I loafed away some happy hours on the Lung' Arno and the Ponte Vecchio. I lunched at a little restaurant near the Badia, nor do I blush to record that I ate cuttle-fish, artfully prepared, and drank several glasses of the country wine,—an excellent vintage which always puts one out of patience with the bottled acerbity provided by the Florentine hotel-keepers. Afterwards I wandered in the cool galleries till four

o'clock, and then I took a carriage in the Piazza and was driven to Mr Rutherford's villa through the Porta Romana.

I found him looking exactly as he did when I had met him at Ravenna; he still wore his brown velvet coat, his prodigious necktie, his enormous intaglio ring, and his tortoise-shell spectacles; his Olympian head of hair was still covered by a broad black sombrero. He received me with stately courtesy, alluding to the villa as "my poor house." The villa, as a matter of fact, is charming, though slightly decayed—a much pleasanter abode, I think, than any of the grandiose American palaces of the Viale Machiavelli,—and the garden is a perfect paradise of roses. Its owner led me into a room full of harpsichords and hammer-claviers and old armour—the typical shrine of a cultured dabbler in all the arts—and began to talk at once of his pictures, which seemed good of their kind, but for the most part belonged to the post-Michelangelesque epoch. I do him the justice to say that he kept off the subject of Petrarch for at least a quarter of an hour.

Of course, though, the ideal portrait of Laura by some wicked disciple of Guido

Reni which hung over the fireplace set him going, and he was fairly under way—his eyes were beginning to gleam and his hands to wave—when the door opened and a woman entered. Mr Rutherford stared at her absently for a moment as if he were trying to remember who she was, and then introduced her to me as his daughter. We shook hands, she uttered some kind of greeting, and then she stood looking at me whilst her father continued his discourse.

Descriptions of the aspect of ladies and landscapes are equally out of place in a diary, and I need only record very briefly the impression that Miss Rutherford made on me. It was an impression of intensely wistful softness; everything about her—her mild eyes, her dull brown hair, her long pale hands, her gentle voice, the lines, even, of her grey dress—was, so to speak, in the same tone, in the most placid of neutral tints. She is, I suppose, between thirty-five and forty, and by this time, poor lady, if she is ignorant of everything else, should know all about Petrarch; whilst her father was talking she had the air of a semi-animate image of Patience. When he fussed away to find some manuscript her face

brightened a little, and she asked me if I would care to go out on the verandah and look at the view.

It was, of course, exquisite, like every aspect of Florence seen from the hills. I uttered the obvious commonplace, and added that I envied persons who had the great good fortune to live in so delectable a spot. She looked at me with her grave, grey eyes.

"I always feel that it is wrong—to live here, I mean," she said. I protested. "All this beauty," she went on, "this soft air and this sunshine and the dreaming hills—they're enervating, at any rate to English people; they're like a drug. When I think of London I feel guilty; I feel that I've shirked all responsibilities, like some one who deserts his country when it's in danger and lolls at ease abroad. Here one seems to live entirely for beauty." She spoke with perfect simplicity.

"I don't think England is in much danger," I said. "And, after all, if you have a passion for beautiful things it would possess you in London just as it does in Florence. What exactly are the responsibilities that you imagine yourself to have shirked?"

She did not answer me directly. "When

I think of London," she said after a moment, "and of all the suffering and want in those dark streets, I'm haunted by that dreadful line in the Bible—you remember—about the people who were fast bound in misery and iron. One ought to be there; one ought to be working to free them, instead of basking in sunshine and painting little pictures. I have the deepest contempt," she concluded, "for the English who live in Italy."

I retorted that a great number of the English who lived in England were far more contemptible, and that I had always found the British colonies in Rome and Florence to contain a number of delightful persons. Miss Rutherford frowned slightly.

"Oh yes, they're delightful," she said; "what the world calls delightful, at least. They paint, or they know Dante, and the museums, and the galleries, and the customs of the *contadini*. But they don't live; they're all spectators. They just dabble in life."

"Well, it makes them happy," I said feebly. Miss Rutherford shook her head.

"We aren't here to be happy," she explained very gently. "We're here to *live*."

At this moment, when our conversation had attained these exalted philosophical heights,

Mr Rutherford returned with his manuscripts, and his daughter, after bidding me farewell, vanished into the house. A sentimentalist, I suspect, but a thoroughly good creature. No doubt Petrarch is responsible for most of her philanthropic yearnings. I suppose she plays the harpsichord and the hammer-clavier. Her instantaneous plunge into confidential depths was startling but rather attractive. (The female passion for platitude traceable to the instinct of sexual self-protection?)

June 3rd.

Mr Rutherford has invited me to stay at the Villa Valchiusa. He is expecting a nephew—a young painter from Paris called Garth—whom he wants me to meet. I have accepted the invitation, and go to the Villa to-morrow evening. I met Miss Rutherford in the Via Tornabuoni this afternoon, and expressed my pleasure at the prospect of staying with them; she stared at me for a moment with blank astonishment, and then smiled. Her father had omitted to warn her that I was coming. “I’m afraid you will find us very quiet,” she said, “but Louis may arrive at any moment; he never

lets us know beforehand." Louis, apparently, is Mr Garth's Christian name. I walked back with her as far as the Porta Romana. We talked about Browning, whom her father had known intimately. Distinctly an intelligent woman, shy, but has a certain dignity.

June 8th.

When I arrived at the Villa[—] there was doubt in my soul; I was well on the way to regretting that I had accepted the invitation and renounced the sweets of liberty. Twenty-four hours with the Rutherfords, however, were enough to make me feel ashamed of that state of mind. Old Mr Rutherford is merely pleasantly eccentric; his reminiscences are delightful, and Petrarch turns out, after all, to be only one of his many interests. As for his daughter, I shrink from attempting the analysis of her gentle temperament; one can't define her charm, yet it seems to pervade the house like some quiet, soothing, eminently satisfying harmony of colour. She is absolutely simple and sincere, and candidly ignorant of the wiles and wickednesses of life; but she is the reverse of the mentally anæmic type of saintly female; she has personality, she has a sense

of humour; *enfin*, she has charm. In addition to these virtues, she is a celebrated artist. I made this surprising discovery yesterday, when she was showing me her father's pictures. Mr Rutherford's collection consists entirely, as I wrote before, of not particularly masterly old masters of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century; but his daughter's room, a bare and modest apartment, was hung with water-colours which I recognised at once as the work of Alethea Stanhope. They were admirable examples, and I congratulated Miss Rutherford on possessing them. She looked at me with a slight smile, and then blushed beautifully.

"So you know her work?" she said.

"I'm one of her most ancient devotees," I answered. "I appreciated her fifteen years ago,—long before she was famous. By the way," I added, "doesn't she live in Florence? or is it Siena? Do you know her?"

Miss Rutherford seemed really embarrassed. She gave a little nervous laugh and said, "Oh yes, she lives in Florence." Then she turned away abruptly. "I am Alethea Stanhope," she said. I uttered a foolish exclamation.

"Are you really?" I cried. "How jolly! But why do you call yourself Stanhope? I never heard before of a painter assuming a fictitious name. And why didn't Mr Rutherford tell me that I was going to meet a lady of genius?"

Miss Rutherford laughed. "Father has no illusions about my genius, as you're pleased to call it," she said. "He hates all modern painting, and when I began to exhibit he insisted on my concealing my name—his name. So I used my mother's; she was a Stanhope. Alethea is my own name, though he always calls me Laura. Laura is my second name; he gave it me because of Petrarch's Laura, I believe. He always has disliked my pictures; he thinks, poor dear, that painting came to a lurid end with Caravaggio; but when my work grew well known he was sorry that he had insisted on my taking another name. However, it was too late to change then, and I'm always Alethea Stanhope in the catalogues."

I made no comment on Mr Rutherford's behaviour, but I decided privately that he sometimes pushed eccentricity a great deal too far, and I hoped that since his daughter had made a big reputation he felt properly

ashamed of himself. It is more than likely, however, that he doesn't realise how famous she has become; he is absolutely ignorant of modern art movements, has never heard a Wagner opera, and astounded me the other day, when we were in the portrait-room of the Uffizii, by asking if Sargent was a well-known painter.

There is a rickety apology for a studio in the garden, but Miss Rutherford rarely uses it, preferring to paint in her own room, which has a good light. At present the studio is being swept and garnished for Mr Garth, who will have to work under an umbrella in rainy weather, for the roof is as full of holes as a pepper-pot. The whole structure, indeed, looks as if it might collapse at any moment, but Mr Rutherford refuses to repair it—another instance, I suppose, of his passion for the antique. A brief examination of the works which adorned its mouldering walls confirmed my ancient theory that Alethea Stanhope, if she had not specialised in water-colour landscape, might have been one of the finest portrait painters of our time; a carefully finished full length of her father—painted, she told me, entirely “out of her head,” for, of course, the old man wouldn't sit

for her,—was really marvellous, and a rough study of a very beautiful girl, a broad-browed, deep-bosomed Madonna who lay in a low wicker chair with her hands clasped behind her head, seemed to me equally brilliant.

“I did that last winter in Rome,” she said, as I was examining the latter picture. “You know who she is, of course.”

I asserted my ignorance of the sitter’s identity, and added that it was the loveliest face that I had seen for ages. Miss Rutherford nodded gravely. “She is very beautiful,” she said. “Her name is Mary Vernon.”

“The famous Miss Vernon!” I cried.

“I don’t know; is she?” answered Miss Rutherford vaguely. “Her mother was a friend of father’s; she was a great singer. They lived in Rome. Mary still lives there, for half the year at least. Princess Scarpa has given her a set of rooms in her palazzo. It must be an odd life, but it suits Mary. She is odd.”

I am afraid that the curiosity with which I regarded the picture was not wholly artistic. I had heard much in Rome of Miss Mary Vernon, though I had never had the good fortune to see her, and I had come to think

of her as the incarnation, or rather, the reincarnation of Christina Light in Henry James's admirable 'Roderick Hudson.' The Roman tea-parties buzzed with strange tales of her wilfulness, her caustic wit, her superb disregard for the prejudices of ordinary persons, and her ever-shifting matrimonial prospects; she had broken the susceptible heart of a Russian Grand Duke; she had nursed infectious children in Trastevere, and had flirted disgracefully with a Cardinal; she was like one of those splendid women of the Renaissance; she was a heartless coquette, and so on. None of the legends that I had heard seemed appropriate to the serene and noble face of the picture except the story of her exploits in Trastevere, and I was so much astonished to find Mary Vernon looking good as well as beautiful that I had the temerity to ask Miss Rutherford if she thought the portrait an accurate one.

Miss Rutherford smiled. "Why do you ask that?" she demanded. I explained that my idea of Miss Vernon's personality had been very different. She looked at the picture for a short time. "You're quite right," she said. "As a portrait, it's a failure. It's an idealisation; it's how she ought to look. I

have seen her with that expression, but very seldom,—too seldom. She didn't like the picture,—she said that I had made her like one of those placid, stupid Luini Madonnas. So I never finished it. She is very strange. Can you imagine any one disliking Luini?" She murmured all this in her low, sweet voice, still staring at the picture. Then she went to the table, took up a palette and brushes. "I'm going to show you a trick," she said, squeezing out some paints. She selected a very fine brush, and after she had mixed some colours she came back to the picture. She made the point of the brush hover for a moment round the eyes, touched the canvas twice with it almost imperceptibly, and then put down the palette. "Look at it now," she said. I obeyed, and saw that the whole expression had altered; the serene nobility had vanished; it was restless, nervous, almost péevish. I was immensely startled; I looked closely at the picture, but I was absolutely unable to detect any new mark on the canvas; I suppose that she merely made the tiniest alteration to the light in the eyes. I protested that magic of this kind made me uncomfortable, and begged her to restore the original expression;

she smiled, but did not take up the brush. "We'll wait until you have seen the original," she said. "Mary Vernon is coming to stay here in a few days. She visits us every year on her way North."

I expressed my gratification at this news, but I wondered, and am wondering still whether the famous beauty will adapt herself to our placid life at the Villa, or whether she will utterly demoralise and upset us all. I hope sincerely for the mood of the Luini Madonna; but I feel a dismal premonition that she will behave like the spoilt child that she almost certainly is, and will be caustic and petulant or hard and indefatigable. (How I hate women who are never tired!) On the whole, I wish that she wasn't coming. Life here at present is delightful; Mr Rutherford has deserted Petrarch for the moment, and plays beautiful old music on faint claviers all the evening, whilst his daughter and I sit on the verandah and watch the lights of Florence making long reflections in the Arno. All day we follow our own sweet wills; Miss Rutherford paints, old Rutherford writes, and I sit in the garden waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall. It doesn't fall, so I am happily idle.

Miss Rutherford allows me to watch her at work. . . .

June 9th.

Mr Rutherford has ceased to play the clavier, and produces asthmatic sounds from a kind of bagpipe with a voice like a hen. Mercifully, he only plays this infernal instrument during the evening ; in the daytime he is occupied in writing a treatise on the *cire perdue* process of bronze-casting. It is strange to think that the whole of his long life has been passed in this perpetual flitting from one art to another, but it has at least (except for the matter of the bagpipe) been an innocent business, and though he is fussy he is never ill-tempered. I wish, however, that he didn't treat his daughter's existence quite so much as a matter of course. Her personality is certainly the finest of his treasures. Her painting is wonderful, but quite apart from that, her refinement, her gentleness, her delicate humour make her perfectly adorable. She has read my books. She seems to have read everything except the novels of D'Annunzio, who offends her. . . .

June 12th.

We were sitting on the verandah this

morning when the bell rang, and a moment later I heard the sound of an unknown masculine voice. It was not unknown to Miss Rutherford, however, who rose with a glad cry of "That must be Louis!" and went into the house. It was the first occasion when I had seen her in a hurry. She returned after a short time followed by a young man of about thirty, whom she introduced as Mr Louis Garth.

Her cousin is tall and strongly built; his shoulders are herculean, and make an odd contrast with his small closely-cropped head and his thin, clear-cut, and eminently sagacious face. He has something of the air of a Pierrot; his expression is at once sentimental and malicious, candid and melancholy. Like most Englishmen who have spent several years in the company of velvet-breeched ruffians in Paris, he has extremely pleasant, easy manners; and though I am tolerably certain that he was intensely surprised to find a stranger at the Villa, he greeted me as if my presence were the most natural thing in the world. He wears rather old, loose clothes of soft grey stuff, which somehow suit his long figure excellently; his hands—he has fine hands—are disgracefully

stained with cigarette-smoking. I liked him at once; he seemed so agreeably deficient in the solid British qualities of stiffness, grumpiness, self-consciousness, or shyness. As soon as he had sat down cross-legged on the verandah near Miss Rutherford's chair, he began to discourse to us with a kind of airy gaiety that was singularly pleasant; he has all the charm of a clever boy who is not self-assertive, combined with the easy independence of a man who has seen a great deal of the world and toiled hard and successfully at his chosen craft. He confirms my old theory which asserts that though some artists are base beasts, the really delightful ones are the pleasantest fellows alive.

He has been wandering in the Pyrenees, where he fell in with and painted a colony of Basques, the members of which he described as easily the greasiest set of ruffians that ever polluted the fairness of earth. He produced a portfolio full of sketches in support of this assertion, and the Basques were certainly a most ferocious crew. His work seemed to me very clever, vivid, and full of humour, light, and freshness; he has a beautiful line. I felt—this is the most dread-

ful kind of perverted criticism!—I felt that it reflected his debonair personality just as fully as Miss Rutherford's drawings express her own tranquil and beautiful spirit. But, of course, he is a long way below her; though I haven't seen any of his larger things, I am certain of that.

They are obviously very old friends; it is easy to see that she thinks him one of the finest creatures in the world, and he is charming to her. This morning she laughed like a girl of twenty at his absurdities, and really caught the infection of his gaiety; I had never realised that she had such a gift of merriment. We were all infected; when old Mr Rutherford came out he instantly began to perpetrate the most amazing puns, and I, even I, was monstrously jocose. Garth professed himself delighted at the prospect of Miss Vernon's arrival. He has seen her several times, and wants to paint her. Meanwhile, he has roughed in a life-sized head of Miss Rutherford which promises well, though at present he has not quite succeeded in rendering the soft light in her eyes. He began it on the verandah after lunch, but he intends to work in the dilapidated studio, where he has already arranged his canvases

and paint-boxes. I noticed, when I went there with him, that Miss Rutherford had removed her portrait of Miss Vernon.

June 14th.

There is really nothing to record except that we have all attained the most pleasant intimacy, and that Miss Vernon is expected to arrive to-morrow. The head of Alethea is coming on very well, and the gifted painter is evidently pleased with it and with life in general. Yesterday afternoon he accompanied me to the Belle Arti, and afterwards insisted on my embarking with him in a crazy craft which he hired from some fishermen below the waterfall. Our voyage was swift and hazardous, except when we stuck in the mud; but the sunset was magnificent. We went about two miles beyond the end of the Cascine, and returned on foot.

As we were walking through the garden, Garth suddenly asked me if I didn't like his cousin enormously. I responded with appropriate superlatives, and he nodded approval, asserting, almost with emotion, that she was the kindest and best person alive. . . . He spoke so fervently that I was assailed with sudden suspicion. Has he, I wonder, come

here to ask her to marry him? I don't think that she would refuse him; her devotion to him, as I noted before, is obvious; and though she is seven or eight years the elder, he would be a very fortunate person. I await developments—I feel almost certain that they will come—with interest. I don't know what will happen to old Mr Rutherford, but no doubt he will contrive to be happy with his Petrarch and his Caravaggio, and probably Garth and Alethea will make him live with them. By the way, I am to call her Alethea; that was arranged yesterday morning, in spite of Mr Rutherford, who moved an amendment for Laura, and was out-voted by three to one. It is really flattering that a middle-aged fogey like myself should have been received into cordial friendship by such charming people. I begin to imagine that I am not such an old bear as I thought.

To-night Mr Rutherford, in his scarlet smoking-cap, played Bach on the harpsichord by the light of a few candles—he has a head that Tintoretto should have made immortal. Alethea turned the pages of the music for him; she wore a gown of dove-coloured silk, and in the mellow light her

hair was like an aureole of faint gold. I could think of no painter who would be worthy of *her* as his subject, except perhaps Botticelli. Or Leonardo; but Leonardo would have over-subtilised the almost childish sweetness of her lips and eyes. She looked absurdly young to-night. Garth sat watching her all the evening, smoking cigarette after cigarette. . . . I notice that when they talk—he, with his easy, copious flow of words, and she, with her gentle, hesitating precision,—they each manage to give out surprisingly good things in the simplest way; Garth, for instance, can embody a really penetrating and subtle piece of criticism in a few words of picturesque jargon. I make a sad contrast; whenever I join in their talk, I seem to utter dreadful platitudes in the most pompous manner possible. It really is very good of them to suffer me so gladly. (Is there anything in life more depressing than the dull vacancy which overwhelms the pedantic mind when it comes in contact with imagination, with swift intuition, with the white heat of genius? But at all events the punishment is appropriate. . . .)

I am really absurdly happy.

June 15th.

After all, I recant; diaries are meant to contain descriptions of women! Miss Vernon arrived this evening with a tiny Italian maid and a large assortment of luggage. She certainly is a glorious creature; tall, with a beautiful figure, magnificent dark eyes and hair, and a profile absolutely Greek. This sounds as if she were the heroine of a sensational novel, but I am still slightly bewildered by her beauty, her deep slow voice, and her enigmatic expression, and I find it difficult to write of her with critical calm. I only know that I was conscious all the evening of an ever-deepening conviction that she is several sizes too large for the Villa; positively she makes us all dwindle to dwarfs. She appeared at dinner in a black dress that displayed the finest arms and shoulders ever beheld by my monkish eyes; I never saw anything in the world like the poise of her head. Her complexion is dark—her mother was a Venetian—but without a hint of sallowness, and her hair is raven-black. I must confess, however, that she is not in the least like a Madonna; Alethea's picture is a failure as a portrait. Miss Vernon's face, when in repose, is almost inscrutable, but, as far as I could

judge, it is never absolutely tranquil; if it ever is, its calm is sardonic, not happy. Often her eyes glow with a distinctly ironical light, and sometimes they become, in an instant, blank and expressionless as dead coal. Her self-possession is complete; several times during the evening I found that she was regarding me with a calm, intent scrutiny, as if she were wondering—quite kindly, not at all contemptuously—whence her friends had exhumed me; and when my eyes met hers she continued to look at me as if she were unconscious that I was alive. She has an amusing but slightly indolent method of speech, and moves her hands beautifully whilst she talks. She can laugh, and though she says caustic things, she is not, I feel certain, ill-natured. Yet in spite of her splendid vitality and loveliness, I cannot escape from feeling that something has happened to embitter her, that she is really without illusions, and that she regards herself as the spectator of a life in which she seems to be playing so brilliant a part. After dinner she sang old Italian folk-songs. Perhaps her voice—a mezzo-soprano—is too powerful for the *genre*; at any rate, it was too loud for the room; and though her control of it was

perfect, I did not enjoy the elaborate treatment of airs which I have so often heard children sing in Tuscany and Umbria. Mr Rutherford accompanied her, frowning disapproval at the music, but playing it with admirable delicacy. Afterwards she sang Puccini, playing for herself, as Mr Rutherford fiercely refused to aid and abet in the reproduction of such modern abominations. She is, I think, a born dramatic singer; the airs from *La Tosca* and *La Bohème* suit her perfectly, and her rendering of them was really fine, full of power and *élan*, but never noisy or cheaply theatrical. Splendid though her voice was, however, it astonished me less than the passionate energy in her face whilst she sang; her indolently ironical air had completely vanished, and she looked like an ecstatic seraph. She sings without an apparent effort; of course she has a superb physique, and she doesn't make ugly grimaces. Alethea watched her with a rapt, and Mr Rutherford with an agonised expression. Garth sat with his chin supported on his fists, staring at her profile; her beauty is certainly enough to steal away the soul of any poet or painter.

Garth, by the way, was less talkative than

usual during dinner, though when he spoke he was as amusing as ever. After the ladies and Mr Rutherford had gone to bed we smoked cigars on the verandah, and I ventured to hint that Miss Vernon's beauty surpassed all my expectations. Garth did not join in my pæan of praise, but briefly agreed that she was fine, and changed the subject. I am tempted to believe that he does not wholly rejoice in Miss Vernon's advent; I suppose—selfish beast!—he wanted Alethea all to himself.

June 16th.

This morning Alethea and Miss Vernon braved the heat and went to the Pitti; I worked with Mr Rutherford, and Garth shut himself up in the studio with Alethea's portrait. At noon I went to see how he was progressing, and found that he had turned Alethea's face to the wall and had begun a life-size study of a woman that it was already easy to recognise as a portrait of Miss Vernon.

For once he seemed to be in a silent mood, and when I rallied him (in my usual ponderous manner) on his fickleness he did not reply, but frowned at his new picture. I

looked at it over his shoulder; he had merely roughed in the figure in raw umber, and the face was a blank; but already I was able to realise that he had made an admirable beginning. Miss Vernon was sitting in precisely the same attitude which Alethea had chosen for her picture, except that her hands lay in her lap.

He painted away for some time in silence, then he turned towards me suddenly. "Not so bad, is it, considering that I haven't had a sitting yet?" he said.

I replied appropriately. He looked at me; there was a funny gleam in his eyes—half-penetrating, half-mischievous.

"She doesn't know that I've done this," he added.

I remarked that Miss Vernon ought to feel flattered.

He shrugged his big shoulders and blew a cloud of cigarette-smoke. "Oh, I think not," he said. "Every one has tried to paint her. They're all failures, though, thank Heaven."

"Even Alethea?" I asked.

He stared at me. "Has Alethea done her?" he demanded.

"Haven't you seen it?" said I.

He shook his head. "Beastly secretive of

Alethea," he said. "Now *hers* might be a success. If she had gone in for portraits she'd have beaten every one. The Luxembourg would have bought her portrait of her father if he hadn't refused to allow it to be hung there. You remember it? It was called 'Le Collectioneur.' It ought to have been stuck up alongside the Whistler; it was as fine—it was, really. We must ask Alethea where it is now; probably my uncle has given it away, or put it at the back of his bookshelves to keep out the damp."

"It was here before you came," I said. "Alethea took away all her pictures then."

"She can't bear to hear me praise them," said Garth. "She knows that she ought to be doing portraits. She's a wicked old woman!" He painted for several minutes, then, without looking at me, he murmured, "If only we could persuade her to have another shot at Miss Vernon!"

"The first shot was good enough for me," I said.

He shook his head. "The second would be better," he retorted. "You never really see any one until you've painted them once—a woman especially. There are only two

ways to get to know women; one is to paint them, and the other is to live with them. If you don't know a woman really, and try to paint her, you get nothing but her outside; all the character escapes you. I don't believe that the *Monna Lisa* was Leonardo's first shot at that lady; but anyhow, I know that my first shot at Miss Vernon won't be a success. It'll be a jolly picture, but I shan't really *get* her; she's too subtle, and as yet I don't know her at all. When it's finished I shall, though."

"Your theory that painting a portrait reveals the whole character of the subject to the painter seems to me to add a new horror to life," I said.

Garth smiled wickedly. "They like it," he said. "The subjects, I mean. That's why they all flocked to Sargent. Being painted by a fellow of his insight—he's a real clairvoyant as regards character—had all the fascination of the confessional."

"But do you think *he* always had two shots?" I asked.

"Perhaps not," said Garth. "But for Leonardo and myself they're absolutely necessary. You wait for my second shot at Miss Vernon," he added.

"I wonder if *she* will wait?" I murmured. The two-shot theory certainly seems hard luck on the sitter. . . .

Miss Vernon, when she returned with Alethea after a long morning amongst the Fra Angelicos, summarily disposed of the problem by refusing to sit at all. She was utterly weary, she asserted, of being painted. Every artist in Rome seemed to look on her as a superior kind of model, and to glare at her with hungry eyes; her only wonder was that she had not been approached by cinematograph proprietors and dealers in picture post-cards. She informed Garth that he could sketch her when she sat in the verandah if he cared to do so, but she flatly declined to pose for him.

Garth acquiesced at once. "You needn't think about it at all," he said. "If I can look at you now and then it will be enough. When you aren't talking you are absolutely still."

Miss Vernon laughed. "I warn you that I shall talk as much as ever," she said. "I strongly advise you not to paint me, Mr Garth. I'm a fatal subject. Dozens of people have tried, and in every case the result was disaster."

"Well, it won't be in my case," said Garth, quickly.

Alethea put her hand on her friend's arm. "That isn't very nice to me, dear!" she murmured.

Miss Vernon stroked her hand for a moment, and then uttered a remarkable sentence. "Oh, you, Alethea!" she said. "You're a woman!"

Now, if any other person of Miss Vernon's sex had said these words, I should have condemned her instantly as silly and vulgar. Perhaps I am bewitched by her beauty; perhaps it was the absolute simplicity of her voice that made me imagine that they had a meaning other than the apparently obvious one. I suppose that I stared at her for some time, for presently I became conscious that she was looking at me with calm, slightly ironical eyes.

"I've become a problem to a philosopher," she said. "Mr Jervoise, Alethea is the only person in the world who really knows me. She painted a picture which was an exact portrait, and then she couldn't bear it, and made me into a Luini Madonna. Didn't you, Alethea?"

I looked at Alethea and saw that she

had flushed to crimson. Miss Vernon gave a short laugh and sank into an arm-chair.

"You mean that no male artist can understand the subtleties of your character?" I asked, and hated myself next moment for the pompous sentence.

Her face dimpled. "No male artist, and no philosopher," she retorted. "And no female artist either, except Alethea. Alethea, unfortunately, knows me through and through. It's a great sorrow to her, of course, for she likes to pretend that every one in the world is good and beautiful and true. I believe she still clings to the hope that I shall become like her Luini Madonna. But, of course, I never shall. It would make life so very dull."

"Mary, you're talking perfect nonsense!" said Alethea.

Garth, who had been watching Miss Vernon with very intent eyes, looked at Alethea for a moment.

"You know it isn't nonsense," he said quietly. "And I'm quite certain that I shall understand Miss Vernon."

"Not a bit of it," retorted that young lady cheerfully. "You'll paint your own idea of me, and it'll be quite wrong. You'll make

me either a Madonna or a devil. And I'm both!" she concluded.

"Every one's both," was my fatuous comment.

Miss Vernon looked at me with a sweet smile and said, "*Are you?*" And this absurdity killed the discussion.

I don't know much about Miss Vernon's character, but I am rapidly arriving at the conclusion that she thinks me a majestic ass.

There were still a few minutes before luncheon, and I strolled down the garden with Alethea, who wanted to gather roses. The flowers set us talking of an Oxford garden that we both knew and loved, and it was only when we were returning towards the Villa that I asserted my hope of Garth's picture proving to be a masterpiece. Alethea looked at me gravely, then shook her head.

"It is certain to be beautiful," she said. "But Mary was quite right. It won't be a true portrait—not that that really matters. Louis has the soul of a poet; he idealises every one and everything." She paused for a moment. "I'm not certain," she went on, "that it wouldn't be better if he did under-

stand her—really know her. Only, then he wouldn't finish the picture."

"Oh!" I cried. "Do you mean that he would lose all interest in her?"

Alethea frowned, and seemed to be wrestling with a thought that refused to formulate itself in words. "Not exactly that," she said. She was silent again, then she spoke abruptly and almost sharply. "Don't you see," she said, "he's one of the best people on earth. He's *good*—really good!"

I stared at her. "Do you mean to imply that she *isn't*, Alethea?" I asked.

She shook her head almost vehemently. "Oh, she's good too," she explained, "but good in a very different way. However," she concluded with a sudden laugh, "we mustn't discuss them!" And she closed her lips resolutely. We marched up to the Villa in silence. Garth had begun already to fix up an easel on the verandah.

June 18th.

A singularly oppressive day; even on the hill it was too hot for even a short walk. Nothing to record except that Miss Vernon sits in the verandah reading French novels whilst Garth paints her. The picture is

coming on well. There has been a severe earthquake in Siena, but fortunately no damage has been done to any historical buildings. If the Mangia tower were to fall! It is said that several slight shocks were felt in Florence, but they certainly passed unperceived at the Villa Valchiusa. Miss Vernon sang to us in the evening. Alethea went to bed early with a headache.

June 19th.

This morning, when I entered the study, I discovered old Mr Rutherford lying in an arm-chair smoking his enormous meerschaum and staring at the ceiling, on which is painted a revel of portly nymphs. It is most unusual to find him idle at that hour, and I ventured to ask if the heat of yesterday had upset him. He shook his shaggy head and waved me, with a princely gesture, towards a chair by his side.

“I am not unwell,” he replied, “but I am a shade perplexed.” He paused for a moment and looked at me rather keenly. “We have become so intimate, my dear Jervoise,” he went on, “that I really believe I should be justified in—or let me say pardoned for—asking your counsel in an affair of some

delicacy and importance. The disparity of our ages must be my excuse if I bore you with a family matter. But if you would prefer that I say nothing,—do not hesitate; *la parole, cher Monsieur, est à vous.*" And he made me a magnificent bow. I expressed my wish to serve him in any possible way. He bowed again. "I am troubled," he said, "as all fathers of a motherless girl must be troubled. The inevitable day must come for all of us; *la vita fugge e non s'arrest' un' ora*, —and I am an old man; five-and-fifty years have passed since I first, a mere stripling, stood by the Arno. You know, I presume, that my little Laura found her Francesco a year ago?"

I gaped at the dear old windbag. "No," I said; "I know nothing of the kind. She never spoke about it." He shook his head vaguely. "Curious! I thought I told you myself," he said. "She was betrothed to her cousin, to the boy Louis. There was no formal agreement; no one was told, and now that I come to think of it, I believe that neither Laura nor I have mentioned the subject since, but as far as I recollect it was arranged that he should come to claim her after his year in Paris."

"He's a very fortunate fellow," I said.

"No doubt, no doubt," agreed Mr Rutherford. "But the odd part of the affair is that though he has been here for some time there has been nothing said to me about this marriage. I only realised this fact this morning whilst I was looking up the Florentine law of dowries. That they should have said nothing to you is even more curious. Why, bless me!" he added suddenly, peering at me through his tortoise-shell spectacles, "you might have fallen in love with her yourself!"

"I suppose they realised that I was incapable of such an act of presumption," I said tartly. I felt—I can't account for the sensation,—I felt really irritated by the secretive behaviour of Alethea and Louis. Mr Rutherford continued to peer at me; then he said, "I find myself in a position of considerable difficulty. I am naturally anxious to know that Laura will not be left alone in the world after my death, but I do not wish to be indiscreet,—to ply her or Louis with embarrassing questions. There may have been a lover's quarrel; I may have attached too much importance to Laura's very fragmentary confidences of a

year ago. Therefore, my dear Jervoise, I want you—if you can conscientiously do so—to let me know if they tell you anything, or if you are able to draw any deductions from their attitude."

I protested that he treated the matter with too much delicacy, and asserted that he had far better speak to Alethea. He shook his head, and there was real terror in his eyes. "No, no!" he said. "The truth is, my dear friend, I daren't risk a scene, an uncomfortable *mal-entendu*. You, as a man of the world, will soon realise how matters stand. The simple scholar is pathetically helpless in these crucial moments."

I had a strong suspicion that the simple scholar was merely pathetically lazy. I agreed, however—I hope I am not becoming a base conspirator—to let him know if Alethea or Garth favoured me with information concerning themselves. The old man brightened at once, and then, obviously dismissing the matter altogether from his mind, began to hold forth on Tuscan jurists of the Quattro-cento.

So my suspicions were correct. I ought, I suppose, to be very glad that this delightful pair are to form a union, but like Mr

Rutherford, I feel that I want some definite knowledge of their plans before I give them my amicable blessing. It is odd that neither of them told me of the engagement, but probably each assumed that the other had done so. Of course it is possible that they may have decided not to marry; but Alethea, I am certain, is in love with her cousin, and I know that he admires her immensely. I wonder, by the way, if she has confided in Miss Vernon?

June 20th.

She hasn't. I found Miss Vernon alone on the verandah this morning, reading 'Du Sang, de la Volupté et de la Mort' (odd that Barrès, the eclectic, the ironical, should have chosen so blatant a title), and she interrupted me when I began to speak of the patriotic novels by the same famous writer. They bored her, she said; she knew they were brilliant, but she really couldn't feel any interest in Boulanger and the Panama scandals; the history of the day before yesterday always seemed squalid. Then she asked me why I wasn't in love with Alethea. I replied jocularly that it had never occurred to me that I wasn't; she frowned slightly,

and looked at me with an air of indolent disapproval.

"It's a pity that you are so strange," she said. "Alethea," she went on, "is one of the few women who ought to marry; it wouldn't ruin her, it wouldn't make her an *égoiste à deux*. Of course you're not nearly good enough for her, but you're decent, and kind in your own dreary way. She might reform you. You're the only man she knows who is possible for her."

"Oh, indeed?" I retorted. "I imagine that she doesn't think so."

Miss Vernon did not appreciate this remark. "I'm afraid not," she said. "I'm afraid that she'll never marry now." She fanned herself slowly with her book.

"Since we have embarked on this subject," I said, "not that I think we should have done so, why shouldn't she marry her cousin? They're tremendous friends."

Miss Vernon closed her eyes. When she does this she really looks like a Madonna.

"That will never happen," she said slowly.

"How do you know?" I demanded. She opened her eyes and looked at me calmly. "I should prevent it," she said. "It would be quite fatal for both of them."

Her manner irritated me intensely. "Oh, that's nonsense!" I cried.

"You would think so," said Miss Vernon pleasantly; "but as the subject doesn't seem to be a fortunate one, suppose we drop it." And she began to talk about an opera which we saw a night or two ago. She really is a most amazing person. Result, I suppose, of cosmopolitan life; I certainly never met any one like her at Oxford. Of course it is very bad form. . . . Odd, too, that she should have spoken about Alethea's marriage just after old Rutherford favoured me with his confidence. If she were any one else I should be certain that she was jealous of Alethea; but I don't feel that. Perhaps she disapproves of first cousins marrying; perhaps she was merely amusing herself by trying to shock me. But she didn't impress me as being amused; in fact, her eyes, after I had made that remark about Garth and Alethea, were rather extraordinary.

Garth, by the way, had retired from the world to the privacy of the old studio, where I retreated after my brief interview with Miss Vernon. I found him looking worried and nervous, but he greeted me with his accustomed cheerfulness. He was contem-

plating the portrait of Miss Vernon, which was more than half-finished. I inquired how he was getting on. He flung out one of his long hands with a comically desperate gesture. "*Look at the damned thing!*" he cried.

I looked, and at first saw nothing remarkable. Closer inspection, however, under his guidance, revealed the fact that Miss Vernon, in the picture, wore a distinctly feline expression. "I can't get rid of it—that sort of I'd-bite-if-I-liked-but-I'm-lazy look," he explained. "*She* never looks like that." I remembered Miss Vernon's expression of a few minutes before; Garth had reproduced it perfectly.

"Perhaps she does sometimes," I said, "and you've subconsciously noticed it." Garth poured scorn on this suggestion.

"And even if she ever did look like that it wasn't characteristic, it wasn't really her," he wound up. "I made sure yesterday that I had got her face perfectly, and then when I came in here this morning the thing was all wrong again. It's perfectly maddening; she will have to sit to me,—really to sit."

"How about Alethea?" I asked. Garth swung round sharply and stared at me.

“What about Alethea?” he demanded. I realised that he was looking at me almost defiantly.

“Her picture, I mean,” I explained. “Have you finished it?” He replied that he could do so at any time, but Miss Vernon was leaving in a few days. Then he began to stipple away at the eyes of the picture, and made a dreadful mess of them, and swore. I thought it wise to leave him. . . .

June 23rd.

Only three days have passed since I made the last entry, and already a depressing change has taken place in the former peaceful atmosphere of the Villa. I suspected that Mary Vernon would stir us all up, and she has emphatically done so. For the whole of the three days she has flirted energetically —there is no other phrase for the process—with Louis Garth. She insisted on really sitting for her portrait; she talks to him and looks at him exclusively, and she goes off under the moon with him for hours after dinner. No doubt she is very attractive and Garth is an artist, but I think that his behaviour—he has fallen an easy victim, as far as one can judge—is less than decent,

when one considers that he was practically engaged to Alethea. That poor lady, who began by congratulating herself that Louis and Mary had "got on together" so well, now looks the reverse of happy, though of course she pretends to observe nothing, and even tries to make their behaviour appear to be usual by taking me into the garden—in another direction—after dinner. During these nocturnal excursions she speaks very little, and even when I fall into flower-beds she does not smile.

The accursed portrait meanwhile proceeds apace, though it is far too amiable for Mary Vernon. I wish to Heaven she would go away; I would go myself—to Siena, in spite of the earthquakes—if I didn't hate the thought of leaving Alethea alone with these wicked people. Mr Rutherford, of course, is sublimely indifferent to all that is happening. I feel strongly inclined to usurp his neglected privilege of talking to Louis like a father. He would probably pull my nose, but I might at least partially awaken the sense of decency which at present slumbers profoundly in his soul. I suppose that the young idiot feels flattered because this girl who has refused grand dukes and

millionaires shows, or pretends to show, a preference for him. I don't believe that really she cares for him deeply; the more I watch her face when she talks to him, the more I feel that she is merely amusing herself. It is extraordinary that he cannot arrive at the same conclusion; my only hope is that his picture may teach him—as he asserted that it would—something about her character.

Of course I really know nothing about her! But when I think of poor Alethea....

June 24th.

This morning Louis announced his intention of taking a holiday from the art of portraiture and of going to sketch old houses near the Ponte Vecchio. Mary Vernon, who sketches quite cleverly, at once decided to go with him. I saw Louis look at Alethea, but that lady shook her head, and declared that she would stay at home and make a drawing of me. Mary Vernon, after gazing meditatively—I think—at my bald patch, remarked that if we went on painting and drawing each other at this rate, every one would accuse us of belonging to a mutual admiration society of the worst kind, and

begged Alethea to make me look like one of Luini's saints.

We watched them as they departed down the garden path. They certainly made a fine pair, physically speaking; Mary Vernon walks like a goddess, and Louis, with his bronzed cheeks, his broad shoulders, and his easy, swinging stride, was a worthy attendant. Half-way down the garden she appeared to imagine that they had forgotten something, for I saw her halt and put her hand on his sleeve—a gesture that implied intimacy. Apparently he reassured her, for they proceeded on their way without looking round.

When they had gone Alethea bent over her drawing materials. "They look well together, don't they?" she asked.

The soft tones of her voice—the very music of resignation—made me feel angry. "Very well," I assented gruffly; "but I rather wish they weren't together quite so frequently."

I expected Alethea to utter a conventional protest against this remark. Instead, however, after drawing a line very carefully on her Bristol board, she looked up at me and nodded gravely. "So do I," she said. I uttered a slight exclamation of surprise. She

bent again over the drawing. "I suppose it sounds disloyal," she said, keeping her eyes fixed on the paper, "but I can't help that. It is what I feel, and it's no use pretending, is it?"

"You mean that she is really like the amended picture?" I asked. She looked up at me with a frankly bewildered air. "The picture you painted of her—it's like her since you altered the eyes," I explained. She smiled faintly.

"I had forgotten about that," she said. "Yes; it's like her, as she is sometimes,—with some people."

"With Louis?" I demanded. She did not answer. "Do you mean that she is not to be trusted, that she's dangerous?" I asked after a moment.

"*I* would trust her," Alethea answered.

"But Louis will be wise if he doesn't?" I persisted.

"Louis doesn't understand her," she said. "If this drawing isn't to be a failure, you must keep quite still." I ignored this injunction.

"You mean he doesn't realise that she is merely amusing herself," I said. "But perhaps she isn't. She may really like him."

"She does like him," Alethea replied. "But no man should trust her. She's quite different from other women."

I stared at Alethea. "Translated into plain brutal English," I said, "that is a fairly strong indictment."

Alethea looked up again. There was a strange brightness in her eyes.

"It's true," she said, almost vehemently. "It's not her fault. She has had great troubles; they've warped her." She paused for a moment, then cried, "How funny, your remembering about the picture!"

I ignored this exclamation. "Alethea," I said, "are you afraid that she'll marry him?" To my great astonishment, Alethea gave a really bitter laugh.

"*She* won't marry him!" she declared emphatically. "If she would I shouldn't care so much. She won't marry any one. She hates all that kind of thing."

"If that is so," I remarked, "he ought to be warned." Alethea laughed again, — a chilling sound.

"Don't you see that it's *impossible* for me to warn him?" she cried.

"Well, I might try," I said. "I'm much

older than he is." Alethea looked at me with alarm.

"For Heaven's sake, don't!" she said. "It would do no good; it would only make things worse, and he would think that I had sent you. If only," she cried with real passion in her voice, "if only I could make him realise, make him *see* her!"

"You had better show him your picture," I said rather brutally. I was irritated by the foolishness of the whole situation. "Perhaps," I added, "when he has finished painting her he'll know all about her true character—which is more than I know. He has an absurd theory that painting a portrait always results in that kind of revelation."

Alethea looked at me gravely. "There's a good deal in that," she said; "if only his picture could show him the truth! But it won't; it'll only reflect his idea of her, his false idea."

"Miss Vernon must be very bad indeed," I said.

"No, she isn't," Alethea retorted. "But she's bad for him."

She declined flatly to continue the discussion. I am still in the dark as to Miss

Vernon. I presume that she is a dangerous philanderer, but Alethea's accusations are so indefinite that, if any one else had uttered them, I should have counted them nothing more than the whirling language of jealousy. I am quite certain, however, that Alethea is not jealous, but only afraid that her adored cousin has fallen head over ears in love with a beautiful, heartless creature, who will forget him as soon as she leaves the Villa Valchiusa. Yet is her estimate of Miss Vernon a just one? I find it difficult to believe that a woman who is physically so splendid and complete should be deficient in the vital instincts of humanity, should be content to philander when she seems, outwardly at any rate, the very ideal of a passionate lover. This, of course, is the wild language of ignorance. Her type, as I observed before, is most rare in Oxford society. I concluded yesterday that she was merely amusing herself with Louis, but now that Alethea has talked to me I am not so sure. Would Alethea be concerned about a mere flirtation? I swim in unknown waters. At any rate, it seems as if I should have to report to Mr Rutherford that the idea of an engagement between Alethea and Louis has been definitely abandoned. . . .

June 27th.

There is little to record except that Louis and Mary Vernon have spent the greater part of the last two days in each other's company, that there has been a slight earthquake at Empoli, and that Alethea looks grey and worried. She had a long talk with Louis in the garden this morning, and looked more miserable than ever when it was finished. Luckily old Mr Rutherford has forgotten all about the engagement, and has asked me no questions. Miss Vernon, who was to leave for England yesterday, is staying on until the whole party disperses on the first of July.

Later.

I write this after midnight, having been to dine with the Mounseys, who have an *appartamento* close to Casa Guidi. The Villa was in darkness when I returned, but as I passed the dilapidated studio I saw a light shining through some chinks in the wall. Fearing that burglars might have broken in, I applied my eyes to one of these apertures, and saw Alethea. She was sitting on a camp-stool before the portrait of Mary Vernon, and staring fixedly at that work of art. I withdrew as noiselessly as possible. . . .

June 28th.

An extraordinary day.

This morning I went down to the Laurentian Library. Shortly before my departure Mary Vernon announced that the studio was too hot, and that she intended to sit on the verandah. She established herself, with a novel and many cushions, on her usual long chair, and presently Louis came out of the studio with his easel and paint-box. I was glad that Alethea was not present to see him as he bent over Mary and arranged her cushions. When this was done—it took an abominably long time—he went back to the studio for the picture. Mary Vernon turned towards me.

"You look very cross this morning," she said. "Are you anxious about him?"

"About whom?" I demanded. She waved a hand in the direction of the retreating Louis.

"You needn't be anxious," she went on. "I am looking after him very carefully."

Her voice made me lose all self-control. "You're doing your best to ruin his life," I said. She smiled indulgently.

"Perhaps I am not as bad as you and Alethea think," she said. "Suppose I told you that I had saved him?"

"Saved him from what?" I said. It seems to be my fate to do nothing but ask these stupid questions.

"From Alethea," she answered. "And Alethea from him. Don't look so disgusted. I have really done it. They will never marry."

"I hope they will marry as soon as you go," I said. "She's devoted to him, and he'll realise it when you are—out of the way. And now that we are on the subject, let me inform you that I don't believe a word of what you told me about their being unfitted for each other, and I know that you don't either. You've merely been amusing yourself."

I half expected to see Miss Vernon look annoyed, or even ashamed, but I was quite unprepared for the actual effect of my speech. She sprang up suddenly and stood in front of me; her eyes blazed, and her face was contorted with anger. "You think I'm that kind of person!" she cried. Words seemed to fail her for a moment, then she regained her self-control. "I don't know why I should trouble to answer you," she said slowly, "but I'll tell you this. "He's the only man in the world that I ever liked, but if he and Alethea

had been in love with each other I would have gone away as soon as I realised it. As it is, I've stayed, and when I go away on the first of July Louis will go with me." She stared at me defiantly. I must reluctantly chronicle that she looked magnificent, and that I felt microscopic.

"So you're going to marry him after all," I said, rather feebly. At that moment Louis came out of the studio and began to walk up the garden. Miss Vernon glanced towards his still distant figure, and then looked at me very calmly.

"Marry him!" she said. "Certainly not!"

This extraordinary assertion finished me off altogether. I could only conclude that she was mad. She returned to her chair. A few moments later Louis joined us. He was staring hard at his picture.

"It's very funny," he said, placing it on the easel. "Yesterday I thought that I had really got the expression right, and now, this morning, it's all wrong. As soon as the paint dries something seems to happen to the high lights. To-day," he went on, looking critically at the canvas, "to-day it looks like a sort of Carmen. What do you think of it, Jervoise?"

I was too much overwhelmed by Miss Vernon's last remark to attempt any coherent criticism. "It's a fine painting," I answered. Louis threw away the end of his cigarette almost angrily.

"I know that," he said, "but it's a deuced bad portrait. It's the eyes that go wrong. I believe these paints are putrid," he concluded fiercely. "Mary, I've made you into an absolute witch!"

"Mr Jervoise thinks I am one," said Miss Vernon.

"So you are, but not this kind," said Louis, still gazing into the picture. "And yesterday it seemed so good. It's downright uncanny. I believe there's the ghost of an old master in that studio." He began to paint. . . . I remained sitting there, staring at him foolishly. So this was why Alethea had gone to the studio at midnight! At first I felt inclined to laugh wildly, but after a moment the pathetic folly of her behaviour dawned on me, and I rose and walked down the garden, feeling perfectly distracted. . . . Decidedly, I was not meant to associate with cosmopolitans and artists; I have gone about all day with a haunting sense—a sense which I have not experienced since I was a child—that I have lost

the safe and commonplace atmosphere of ordinary life and move and breathe in the fantastic realms of nightmare. Even now, as I write this note in the Laurentian Library, I can hardly believe that those astonishing persons are really up at the Villa; that Mary Vernon has made up her mind to run away with her friend's *fiancé*, but is determined not to marry him; that Alethea is tampering with Garth's portrait of Mary in the mad hope, I suppose, that he will learn from its amended aspect to see the original as she really is; and that in the midst of all this old Mr Rutherford is sitting, sublimely unconscious, poring over his books or playing his infernal bagpipe. Of course, Mary Vernon *may* not have been serious! Yet I cannot escape from a conviction that she meant every word she uttered. That Alethea has been touching up the picture I feel no doubt. . . .

June 29th.

Almost intolerably hot. Nothing new has happened. Garth and Mary are still always together and Alethea has remained in her own room. I had no opportunity of speaking to Louis, and if I had found one I don't see that it would have been of any use. I can't ask

him if he intends to elope with Mary Vernon, and if I did he wouldn't answer truthfully. I worked for most of the day with Mr Rutherford. Alethea appeared at dinner, and outwardly, everything was as usual; we made music and had a long discussion about the real significance of the *Zauberflöte*. Mary Vernon contemplates me at intervals with the most candid amusement; I suppose that my appearance is slightly frenzied. Louis looks worried and pale; he was, I noticed, unusually attentive to Alethea.

July 3rd.

I am too sick at heart to write more than a brief note of the catastrophe. On the night of the 29th I had been reading in my room, I think for about ten minutes, when the convent bell struck twelve. I closed my book and was about to undress when I heard a low, rumbling noise, and became conscious that the floor was sloping away from me, and that all the furniture in the room was standing at odd angles. I realised that this was my first experience of an earthquake, but before I had time to feel any alarm the noise ceased and the room assumed its normal aspect. I opened my door and, looking out,

I saw Louis coming down the passage ; he was in pyjamas and smoking a cigarette. I was about to go to meet him when I heard outside the Villa a sound like the prolonged rending of a large piece of rotten wood—half-breaking, half-tearing—followed by a series of heavy thuds. Louis uttered a cry.

“Hullo ! that’s the old studio,” he said. “It’s down at last ! I wonder what has happened to my poor pictures.” He ran down the stairs and unlocked the window that opened on the verandah. I followed him into the garden ; it was pitch-dark ; the moon had set.

I heard him stumbling about the flower-beds near the studio, then he uttered a shout. “Bring a light ! there’s some one here !” I rushed towards him and struck a match. Alethea was lying on the ground about five yards away from the ruins of the studio. There was blood on her forehead and her eyes were closed. Afterwards we realised that she must have been struck by a falling beam just as she had reached the door, and had managed to stagger on for a few steps. We carried her into the house. I believe that she was dead then ; I don’t know. Louis told me afterwards that she spoke to him. Of the

horrors that followed—the frenzied old man tearing his white hair, the wailing servants, Garth's face as he bent over her—I cannot yet bear to think. She had a palette and brushes in her hand when we found her, and her dress was smeared hideously with paint and blood. . . . If she had stayed in the studio she would, in all probability have escaped; the interior was only slightly damaged, and Garth's picture of Mary Vernon was intact. I ought to say that Miss Vernon behaved splendidly. She stayed in the Villa until after the funeral, then she left for England. Louis remains with old Mr Rutherford.

Alethea was buried in the beautiful cemetery beyond San Marco. Poor, gentle lady, may she rest in peace. . . .

I return to Oxford to-morrow for the University Extension Summer Course. . . .

**SAN CRISTOFORO AND
MARIA ASSUNTA**

SAN CRISTOFORO AND MARIA ASSUNTA.

OF the many unsympathetic personages that are encountered by the student of ecclesiastical history during the course of his researches, not the least offensive are the hard fathers of dogma who were wont to inhabit stinking caves, mud huts, and vacant sepulchres, and to devote their leisure entirely to working out their own salvation in an insanitary gloom. In pleasant contrast to these depressing troglodytes, each glowering in the darkness like a peevish dog over his own particular bone of private salvation, shine the names of those saints and good men who, for all their pre-eminent merit, did not despise the homely tasks of everyday existence, but transfigured into deathless examples the most ordinary affairs, such as the slaying

of dragons and the taming of savage hearts in bears and in wolves by means of their own excellent virtue. Nor are those worthy men a whit less admirable who (whether from their physical disability or from a wise propensity on the part of the monsters to shun conflicts in which they invariably suffered decapitation) were unable to wage war against gryphons and horned serpents, yet did not disdain the sweet and humble services of life, and performed the meanest labours with a cheerful heart; teaching kindness and tolerance, helping the needy, living in the open air, and forgetting all about Arians and Pelagians and the flames that ravened for the damned. It was in such a spirit, one likes to think, that Sant' Antonio Abate kept a fatherly eye on all poor beasts of burden, being especially the patron of mules; it was in such a spirit that San Juan of Tarragona watched over the morals of young persons engaged in the vinegar trade, and San Filippo Neri founded his immortal institution, the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon; it was in this spirit, finally, that San Cristoforo turned himself into a human ferry-boat and, many centuries afterwards, gave a sign unto the faithful, vindicated the innocent, and punished the guilty in the most practical possible man-

ner. His beautiful legend is known to every one, but the later prodigy that he wrought may possibly have escaped the reader's attention, since it does not, as yet, appear in official biographies of the holy man.

It happened in Italy, at a small city called Acquacasciante. You will search Baedeker, by the way, in vain for Acquacasciante, though it was once a walled stronghold of some importance; it lies far away from the track of the tourist, in the beautiful country south of Ancona, within sight of the Monte Conero. I myself, who brag freely concerning my knowledge of Italy, discovered it by accident. I was travelling in the slowest train ever devised by the naughtiness of railway companies, when, at a wayside station, a telegram was handed to the engine-driver. He read it, and without a word, descended from the antique machine that he had urged, and vanished utterly from our midst. On inquiring the reason of this unusual action, I was told that he had received information of a strike which he felt himself bound to join. No one in the station knew how to drive an engine, so I, too, descended from the train, and perceiving a picturesque little town on the slopes of a hill about a mile away, shouldered my rück-sack and set out for it.

It was hoped, though hardly expected, that an expert on engines would arrive in three or four hours ; but I decided that, if I could find a passable inn, I would stay the night at Acquacasciante, for I had begun to regard the train as the most offensive of my natural enemies.

I was amply rewarded for my enterprise ; Acquacasciante proved to be a very pleasant little city. Its walls were apparently of immense antiquity ; their base, I imagine, was Etruscan. The Palazzo Comunale and the Cathedral were thirteenth-century buildings with their exteriors agreeably unrestored. But, alas ! although these edifices dated from so interesting an epoch, the only house of entertainment which a somewhat wild imagination might have dignified with the name of an inn was an absolutely conservative relic of some remote age when civilisation was not, and men lived like vermin in the rocks. I withdrew from it, shuddering, and made for the Cathedral, feeling, as I crossed the piazza, the scornful stare of the *padrona*, a lady of aggressively masculine aspect with a black moustache, burning a hole through my rück-sack to my shoulder-blades.

The interior of the Cathedral, except that it afforded sanctuary from the hirsute female,

was disappointing ; it was whitewashed and bare except for its tawdry altars, which were decorated with a great number of cherubim belonging to what might be called the pneumatic period of fleshly art. There were a few pictures in the same style over the altars, but one, which hung from a column in the nave, made amends for them all—an admirably realised and painted scene of the great event in St Christopher's life. It was a small panel, about two feet by eighteen inches in size, and it was somewhat dark, but a brief inspection convinced me that it was the work, if not of one of the greatest masters, at any rate of an original and powerful artist. In many respects it reminded me strongly of the highly realistic method of Antonio Pollaiuolo. The firmly planted figure of Christopher, a robust and muscular old man, expressed wonderfully his twofold effort to sustain the superhuman burden on his shoulders and to find secure foothold in the swirling yellow waters ; perfectly balanced, he was leaning slightly forward and testing the bed of the stream with a huge, knotted staff. He was of gigantic stature, and his bearded face had a peculiarly attractive expression of passionate energy.

I noticed that the lower part of the column to which the picture had been fixed was covered with a multitude of votive inscriptions, ranging from an ordinary black-edged visiting-card, with a *San Cristoforo B^{mo} mille grazie* written on it in a large round hand, to ugly tinsel hearts and crowns with the initials of the donor inscribed on a scroll below them. Evidently San Cristoforo was a person of importance in Acquacasciante. I tried to obtain some information about the picture from an aged and decrepit crone who was pretending to wash the choir stalls, but her teeth had gone the way of all teeth, and I could not understand anything that she mumbled, beyond the fact that San Cristoforo was a *gran santo* and had wrought miracles. As an art critic she was a failure, but she was no fool; I presented her with a lira, and had the felicity, as I departed, of hearing her test its quality on the altar steps.

On my return to the station I found that there was no prospect of the train starting for two hours. My few fellow-passengers had vanished, and the only living things in the place were the stationmaster, a gnarled and antique porter, and half a dozen dusty hens. The stationmaster, a corpulent and

cheerful person, seemed hugely amused by the engine-driver's escapade, but condoled politely with me on my position, and inquired if I had enjoyed my visit to the little city. I discovered that he was a native of Acquacasciante, and very proud of his birthplace, though he lamented that, socially speaking, it lacked excitement. The only occasion on which it became festive, he added, was during the week of the great pilgrimage.

I revealed my ignorance of this important event, and he favoured me with a graphic description of the vast army of pilgrims which invaded Acquacasciante once a year; of their festivities, their quaint customs, their glorious squabbles and dramatic reconciliations. The town authorities, apparently, were hard put to it to find them lodgings; the inn kept by the lady with the moustache was filled by them (I heard this with feelings of pity and horror) from cellar to attic; they dwelt in the stables with the cows and on the roofs with the cats. The Cathedral, with all its lamps and candles blazing, was open all night long, and many of the poorest pilgrims actually lived in it for the holy week. The great majority of these votaries consisted of *contadini* from the surrounding districts, and they, said the

stationmaster, behaved noisily but excellently; it was only the strangers from farther south who were *maleducati*, and occasionally alleviated the monotony of religious exercises by practical demonstrations of their skill with the knife. Altogether, a gay time for peaceful Acquacasciante. He advised me strongly to visit the city during the celebrations; the procession of the Holy Picture was alone well worth seeing, with all the *contadini* in their different costumes, and the children of the city carrying garlands of flowers.

I remembered then the votive offerings in the Cathedral. "The Holy Picture?" I said. "Which picture is that?"

The stationmaster looked surprised and almost hurt. "Did you not see it, signore?" he asked. "The picture of the saint which hangs on the column in the Cathedral?"

"Ah! San Cristoforo?" I said.

He nodded vehemently. "Without doubt," he answered. "It is for him that they make the pilgrimage. They are always hoping that he will come out again, but as yet he has not done so."

"Come out again?" I echoed. The stationmaster looked at me with pity.

"Is it possible, signore," he demanded, "that you have not heard of the miracle of Acquacasciante?"

"Not a word," said I, feeling grossly ignorant.

He contemplated me for a moment, then glanced round the station. It was empty; even the antique *facchino* had disappeared. He looked at his watch.

"There is more than an hour," he said. "If it will not weary you, signore, I will tell you the story. I was in the city when the miracle happened, and know all the facts. Indeed, who but I should know them so thoroughly? Signore, Maria Assunta is now my wife."

"And who in the world is Maria Assunta?" I demanded, bewildered. This time the stationmaster seemed really hurt, but he recovered after a moment.

"Ah! I forgot that you know nothing," he said nobly. Then he waved his hand towards a door which was labelled *Capo Stazione*. "If you will be so kind as to come in here," he added, "you shall hear all—all."

That was how I learnt about San Cristoforo—his remarkable reappearance and con-

founding of the wicked. If only, instead of my cold prose, I could give it you in the words of the stationmaster, and convey some hint of his gestures, his mimicry, the varying intonations of his fat, jolly voice, his manner of rolling his black eyes! But even if this were possible his speech would lose all charm in translation, and it is better for me to tell you the story as I remember it. I forgot to say that the stationmaster held that the picture was painted, not by Pollaiuolo, but by some angel whose name I cannot recall.

Maria Assunta was twelve years old, tall and straight and as brown as a ripe filbert. She lived with and drudged for her uncle by marriage, Aurelio Zappi, who had a base and greedy soul, and her Aunt Giannina, a woman conspicuously wanting in personal charm. Slappings, strappings, and curses were the portion of Maria Assunta; Aunt Giannina had a theory that to send her supperless to bed was an excellent tonic for her digestion; and Uncle Aurelio, when he returned from talking politics at the Croce Bianca, would playfully use her as a target for all the pots and pans in the kitchen.

Fortunately his eye—to employ the language of athletics—was slow, and Maria Assunta soon became an adept in the arts of dodging, running, and taking cover.

Shortly before the time when this history begins Uncle Aurelio had been appointed pro-sacristan to the Cathedral—the real sacristan, to whom he had long been under-study, having retired to his bed with a permanent rheumatism. Aurelio was a profound believer in the modern creed that every woman should be educated to work, and consequently Maria Assunta led an energetic life of step-washing, altar-scrubbing, saint-and-cherub-dusting, and gained an extensive acquaintance with the interior of the old church; Aurelio, meanwhile, talked on religious subjects with the official char-woman, to the great disgust of Aunt Giannina.

Maria Assunta, on the whole, was fairly miserable, though there were great consoling days when she played truant and ran barefooted along the hot, dusty roads, or lay on the sun-dried slope of the hillside and tried to tame grasshoppers. Such excursions brought in their revenges, but Maria Assunta's slender body had become remark-

ably hardened to straps and sticks, and when she laid her aching limbs to rest she invariably decided that the crime was more than worth the chastisement, and that she would escape again on the first opportunity. Evasion, however, was difficult; often, when she seemed to have given Aurelio the slip, a heavy hand would descend on her shoulder, squeeze it like a vice, and shake her till her teeth made a noise like the castanets rattled by little boys in the streets. At first, after this happened, Maria Assunta had wept loudly and invoked the aid of Heaven and the neighbours; but latterly she would endure the onslaught in sullen silence, and then bite Uncle Aurelio's fingers with her strong little teeth. Uncle Aurelio would subsequently beat her; but on two occasions she made him howl and dance with pain, which caused her extreme delight. She realised dimly that her existence, contrasted with the lives of other children whom she met in the streets, was not an ideal one, and twice, when Aunt Giannina had been more than usually deficient in personal charm, she had attempted to run away for good and all. On the first occasion she had walked until she

was overcome with hunger and fatigue, and had been brought back by a well-meaning *contadino* in a painted cart; on the second, she had met an old man in a lonely place who had at first seemed kind, but afterwards had kissed her and fondled her and frightened her out of her wits. She ran all the way home, and, for once in her life, found genuine pleasure in beholding Aunt Giannina again. Such adventures produced in her a grim distrust of the world in general, and of old men in particular. Children of her own age she avoided: the little girls were apt to laugh at her bare legs, and the little boys threw stones at the homeless cats which she befriended; grown-up people, even if they seemed kind, she regarded as possible Uncle Aurelios and Aunt Gianninas. Her affection for cats, however, went to practical lengths; she managed, in some strange way, more or less to maintain a small colony of them in a disused yard at the back of the Cathedral, whence they nightly sang the Bishop to sleep. They were ungovernable beasts, savage and quick to scratch; but she preferred their society to that of her own species. When one of them died she wept, and afterwards

religiously exposed the corpse in the Bishop's garden, where it lay in state until the gardener found it.

It chanced that one day she was ordered by Aurelio to clean some brass candlesticks in the lumber-room adjoining the sacristy, whilst that eminent politician went (for without discussion the intellectual life is but a barren affair) to hold great argument at the Croce Bianca. The day was hot, Maria Assunta was weary, and when Aurelio returned he found the candlesticks still tarnished and Maria Assunta fast asleep with her chin buried in her bosom. The virtuous soul of Aurelio waxed hot within him when he beheld this disgusting spectacle; he aroused the sleeper with a hearty box on the ear,—which made her imagine for a moment that the entire Cathedral had fallen,—gave a vivid account of all the devils who were waiting to torture idle little girls for all eternity, and then locked her in the lumber-room and departed majestically. Maria Assunta, I regret to say, kicked and beat the door, and uttered a large quantity of evil words which she had learnt from Aunt Giannina; but finding that he did not return, she instantly became tranquil, knocked the candlesticks

one by one to the floor with neatly directed blows from her strong little fists, and began to explore the room for a means of escape. It was a dusty, vault-like chamber, festooned with cobwebs, and dimly lit by one high grimy window. She was able to see, however, as she went round the walls, that they were hung with pictures, which were for the most part frameless and black with age. Her trained eye—for she had so often been a prisoner—soon told her that there was no possible means of escape, and after a short time she began to wile away her captivity with the contemplation of these works of art.

Formerly she had scarcely glanced at the altar-pieces in the Cathedral,—they all had the same subject, and seemed exactly to resemble one another; but the pictures in the lumber-room were much more interesting; there was one which depicted an energetic and cheerful crowd of black demons with scarlet eyes and teeth, all engaged in thrusting an old gentleman, whose face bore a pleasing resemblance to that of Uncle Aurelio, into a pair of huge gaping jaws; another showed a kneeling saint in the act of neatly catching his own head, which had just been cut off by a handsome executioner

who wore too few clothes; yet another—a delightful conception,—represented a con-course of purple elephants, green giraffes, blue baboons, smiling tigers, nervous rabbits, and bright-hued birds stalking, with a deliciously self-important air, into the celebrated Ark of Noah. Maria Assunta was fascinated by this picture, and gazed at it for a long while. Noah, she decided, looked worried and cross; one felt that, if he had dared, he would have taken a stick and chased all the animals away, for it was obviously quite impossible to fit more than a dozen of them into the ark; Signora Noah, however, was smiling politely at them from one of the windows, and seemed a much pleasanter kind of person than Aunt Gian-nina, for instance.

But in spite of the varied hues of the birds and animals, it was not this picture but the next which really stole away Maria Assunta's heart. It was labelled *San Cristoforo*, and represented an old man with very strong bare legs and a big staff in the act of carrying a small child across an angry river; the child clung very tightly to the neck of the old man, who was proceeding warily and with difficulty. Maria Assunta knew noth-

ing of the legend which the picture illustrated; to her it was merely an actual scene from everyday life, but for some obscure reason it delighted her: perhaps she had seen, and unconsciously envied, the child's expression of tranquil trust in his bearer when mothers carrying their babies had passed her in the street; perhaps it was the charm of the episode that touched her, the idea that a large old man with a beard should trouble to carry a little boy across those uncomfortable waters. Probably, however, it was the face of San Cristoforo which attracted her, even in the first moment when she saw it; he was so completely different from the horrible old men whom she had known; from Uncle Aurelio and the satyr who had kissed her. He seemed so strong, yet so kind; he would not beat the little boy, even if the little boy pulled his beard and hurt him, as seemed probable. He looked, too, as if he would understand little girls as well as little boys, and would be sorry for them when all their bones ached and their feet felt like lead. Altogether, Maria Assunta decided, he was a person whom it would be a real pleasure to meet.

She looked at the rest of the pictures, but found that they were quite uninteresting, and very soon she returned to contemplate the old man. He was very nearly alive, she thought; when she moved from one side of the picture to the other his eyes seemed to follow her, whereas Signora Noah, his only possible rival in Maria Assunta's heart, smiled steadily at the green giraffes. Like many other lonely children, she had acquired the habit of talking to dumb or inanimate things: when her cats misbehaved she would treat them to a highly moral lecture containing a large amount of bad language, in the best manner of Aunt Giannina, and when she washed the saints and cherubim in the Cathedral she would tell them the gossip of the town exactly as it was retailed by the same high authority; but she had always felt that cats and cherubim were equally indifferent to her eloquence; the cats would leave the lecture-room in a marked manner when her discourse had scarcely begun, and the cherubs would stare at her vacantly with their stupid goggle eyes. When she began to talk to San Cristoforo, however, affairs were different; he really seemed interested in what she was saying, though he did not answer

when she asked him why he was carrying the little boy across the river, but looked at her steadily with his watchful, friendly eyes. She liked him more and more, and paid, I regret to say, no sort of attention to the little boy, beyond noticing that he resembled young Marco Evangelista, the chorister, but was much cleaner, and probably less fond of throwing stones at cats. She talked to the old man for a long time, and found that his face grew more and more sympathetic. She thought, even, that he frowned when she told him about Uncle Aurelio's strap, and there was absolutely no doubt that his eyes twinkled when he heard how Aunt Giannina, after having poured forth a savage torrent of invective for ten minutes, stepped back and sat down with great violence in a large washing-tub that was full of very warm water. He looked gratified, too, when she collected the scattered candlesticks and began to clean them, still talking to him; so that, for the first time in her life, she had an almost bewildering sensation of doing work that gave pleasure to some one. By the time that Uncle Aurelio returned she felt that she had made a friend for life, and it was with great reluctance that she left the old man alone amongst

the cobwebs. Of course she said nothing about the picture to Aurelio.

Throughout that summer she went every day to talk with San Cristoforo. The door of the lumber-room was always unlocked, and as soon as she had finished her work, which she performed with a surprising vigour, she would slip through the sacristy and sit on a tall rickety stool in front of the picture. Though San Cristoforo's lips never moved and no sound issued from them, she knew perfectly well all that he was saying ; she heard him with the ear of her mind. He was sorry when she was beaten, and he took a great interest in cats. He didn't feel cold from standing in the water for so long, and he didn't think that people with shoes and stockings were so very much more important than people who went barefoot. He thought it rather a pity that she flew into such terrific rages, but certainly Aunt Giannina was enough to ruin the temper of an archangel. Trying to tame grasshoppers, he imagined, must be fun. No, he didn't suffer from chilblains. Their conversations, it will be seen, were slightly formal in the early days of the friendship, but as soon as their first shyness had passed away they be-

came wonderfully intimate, discussed every subject under the sun, from macaroni to wicked old men, and told each other splendid stories. San Cristoforo's language was always eloquent and sometimes extremely forcible; it was his invariable habit to allude to Uncle Aurelio as that Beastly Old Devil. Aunt Giannina he tersely named The Hag.

Their friendship continued without interruption until the autumn. Maria Assunta felt certain that it would continue for ever, and had firmly decided that she would never leave Acquacasciante. She kept it secret; this was easy, for Aurelio went very seldom into the lumber-room, and he was probably the only person except herself who knew of the existence of the pictures. Therefore she was tremendously startled when she entered the room early on a November morning to find that a stranger had managed to penetrate there, and was inspecting the pictures very closely through a large pair of eyeglasses.

He did not hear her come in, and she stood for some moments staring at him. He was a short, fat man, with a bald head that gleamed in the dim light like a skull; he had an immense hooked nose, thick lips, and

a receding chin. Maria Assunta watched him as he peered at the pictures with his nose almost touching them, and heard him muttering to himself, but could not catch what he was saying. She felt a fierce resentment of his presence, and was wondering if he would go away if she hid behind a cupboard and screamed like a fiend, when the intruder stepped back from the picture which he had been examining and saw her. He seemed surprised, but not frightened, though Maria Assunta glared at him with all the fury that her black eyes could express. Then he smiled, so that his face looked like a squeezed orange, but his eyes watched her keenly all the while. Maria Assunta did not like his looks, and remained near the door.

"My little signorina," he said, "I thought you were a ghost or an angel." He spoke Italian with a snarling accent, and chuckled as if he had said something very funny. Maria Assunta looked at him steadily.

"I thought you were the devil," she remarked. The intruder chuckled again.

"Some one has taught you pretty manners," he said. "But perhaps I am the devil after all." He fumbled in his pocket and produced

a soldo, which he held up between his fat finger and thumb. "For how much," he asked with a leer, "for how much will you sell me your pretty little soul?"

Maria Assunta put her hands behind her back and did not answer. She knew perfectly well that he was not the devil; the devil would be much too sensible to appear in a church where all kinds of indignant saints might get hold of him; and also, he would not be so foolish as to offer one wretched halfpenny for a real live soul. The intruder, she knew, was a foreigner; possibly one of the Tedeschi who had killed her father and left her to the tender mercies of the non-combatant Uncle Aurelio. To think that he should dare to rub his ugly nose against her beloved picture!

The stranger did not appear to be at all affected by her angry silence; he continued to grin at her, and after a moment he spoke again.

"Listen, *carina mia*," he said. "You need not sell your precious soul for the soldo; to earn it you need merely tell me the name of the person who owns these pictures."

Maria Assunta's heart began to thump. She stood for some time scratching the

ankle of one of her feet with the big toe of the other—an elegant gesture which invariably denoted that she was enduring an acute mental crisis. Then she replied slowly and emphatically, "God."

The stranger stared for a moment, then laughed noisily. "Good child," he cried,—"good child! you have been better brought up than I imagined." He tossed the coin towards her; Maria Assunta allowed it to drop on the floor. "What? too proud?" said the stranger. "You will never wear boots and shoes, egregious signorina." He stooped with some difficulty, picked up the soldo, and put it carefully in his pocket. "Pray do not let me detain you from your doubtless important business," he added with another leer. He turned away and continued to examine the pictures.

Maria Assunta scratched her ankle for another moment, then she ran home as fast as she could and informed Uncle Aurelio that there was a stranger in the lumber-room. At first that worthy person refused to believe her, but when she repeated that the stranger was a *forestiere* who wanted to take away the pictures he became interested, and departed for the Cathedral after

making sundry mysterious signs to Aunt Giannina. The latter promptly set Maria Assunta to work in the kitchen, whilst she herself became immersed in the study of a highly sensational work of fiction.

About an hour later Aurelio returned in an unusually good temper; but he did not forget to rebuke Maria Assunta for being rude to a foreigner of wealth and distinction. He went out again shortly afterwards, this time in the direction of the Croce Bianca. Maria Assunta, as soon as she had cleaned her pots and pans, evaded Aunt Giannina, who was nodding over her novel, and sped like an arrow to the Cathedral, eager to console San Cristoforo. But when she had passed through the sacristy she found, to her intense annoyance, that the door of the lumber-room was locked. She listened outside it for several minutes, but no sound came from within; then she called to San Cristoforo, but he did not answer. Finally, after hunting vainly all over the sacristy for the key, she departed in the worst of tempers. She nearly decided to go to the Croce Bianca and to attempt to pick Uncle Aurelio's pocket while he was in the act of delivering a passionate political harangue,

but fortunately she realised in time that such a course would be futile. Her heart was heavy with foreboding ; she felt certain that some evil was menacing her beloved saint, and racked her brains to discover how she might help him. If she could only obtain the key, she thought, he would be safe for a time, at any rate ; Uncle Aurelio would not be able to have another made for a day or two. But probably the wicked-looking *forestiere* would know how to break open the door.

She haunted the Cathedral like a restless little brown spirit for the whole afternoon, hoping that Aurelio would return ; but Aurelio had found that to drink unlimited quantities of new red wine at the expense of a stranger was an even more delightful occupation than to discuss religious subjects with charwomen. Her temper grew worse as time went on ; she had a fierce altercation with the alleged blind beggar who sat at the door of the Cathedral, and annoyed him so seriously that he began to throw stones at her with extraordinarily accurate aim ; she teased the colony of cats until it migrated *en masse* to the Bishop's garden, in which sacred grove its members, pre-

cariously perched on an old ilex-tree, uttered remarks of the most astounding and regrettable profanity; and when a number of dear little babies were brought to the baptistery at dusk and christened by the light of two tall candles, she stood close to the priest and put out her tongue at them until they roared with terror. Eventually she was ejected, with many slaps, by an indignant godmother.

When she returned home she found that a most unusual atmosphere of festivity prevailed there. Aunt Giannina was engaged in concocting a savoury mess of cuttle-fish and mussels fried in oil, and Uncle Aurelio, who was slightly flushed, was watching her with a beaming eye, and indulging in frequent bursts of cheerful song. He hailed Maria Assunta with a shout, and pretending that she was some grand Duchessa who had come to call, made her a number of profuse bows, complimented her on her distinguished appearance, and actually concluded this brilliant example of his skill in burlesque by offering her a whole lira. Maria Assunta was so greatly astounded by this behaviour that she stared at him until he became annoyed and asked her if she thought that he was

mad. Maria Assunta replied truthfully that she did not know, and then he boxed her ears. Afterwards, however, he became genial again, and allowed her a small share of the cuttle-fish and mussels. They were excellent, but she did not notice their flavour, being wholly preoccupied with the problem of obtaining the key of the lumber-room. Aurelio, before he began his supper, had taken off his boots and his coat; the latter garment he hung over the back of his chair, and as he did so Maria Assunta heard the heavy keys rattle in one of the pockets. It was hopeless, she knew, to attempt to get them at present, and she sat, grimly silent, with her thick eyebrows meeting in a heavy scowl. Her elders paid no attention to her, but ate very fast and noisily, drank great quantities of wine and became extremely amiable to each other. Their faces grew more and more red, and she hated them, and yearned for San Cristoforo. Her heart was heavy with an indefinable sense of disaster.

Fortune was kind to her, however. Aurelio, with many nods and winks to his wife, drank an enormous draught to the health of some one whom he did not name, and then an-

nounced his intention of finishing the evening at the Croce Bianca. On hearing this, Aunt Giannina pouted beautifully and began to grumble at being left alone. The gallant Aurelio instantly invited her to accompany him, and when she pointed to all the dirty plates, he declared that it was disgraceful for a woman of her beauty and charm to waste the precious hours in menial tasks; the *ragazza*, he added, would wash up the dishes. He put on his boots and then his coat; Maria Assunta watched him eagerly, and at last, to her great joy, saw him take the keys from his pocket and hang them on a hook near the door.

As soon as the revellers had departed, and almost before the sound of their footsteps had ceased to echo in the quiet street, she went swiftly to the bunch of keys. She saw instantly that the key of the lumber-room was amongst them,—it was much more rusty than the others,—and when she had detached it from the ring she waited for a few moments to avoid any possibility of meeting her relatives, blew out the lamp, and peered into the street. The coast was clear; next moment she was running helter-skelter towards the Cathedral.

It was nearly eight o'clock, and the night was dark. She knew that the great west doors were closed and the side doors also; but she had discovered another entrance into the church through the Bishop's private door, which was always unlocked and was reached by climbing his garden wall. The Bishop, very discourteously, had covered the top of the wall with broken bottles, but she had removed a great number of these in order to allow dignified passage for the funeral *cortéges* of her cats.

A strong wind was blowing, and when she reached the foot of the wall she paused for a moment to look up at the Cathedral, which seemed, she thought, like a great grey ship sailing swiftly through the dark sky. Then she climbed the wall in a manner which made the cats regard her with the eye of envy, dropped lightly down on the farther side, and in another moment had glided noiselessly through the door.

Inside, the darkness seemed to wrap her round and press on her like an enormous velvet pall, but when she had groped her way to the choir she saw a faint light on the high altar, and was able to steer her course to the sacristy without difficulty. She

could hear her footsteps echoing all over the Cathedral, and wondered vaguely if the saints would be angry if she disturbed their holy slumbers. It was not easy to find the key-hole of the lumber-room door, but at last she pushed it open, and began to grope along the wall towards the pictures.

When she reached the first of them she remembered that it depicted the devils finally disposing of the old gentleman who resembled Uncle Aurelio, and she shivered; but really, she thought, there was nothing to be frightened of; if they behaved in that way to Uncle Aurelios they were certainly good devils and wouldn't hurt her. Then she came to Noah and the animals, and passed it quickly; the next picture, she knew, was San Cristoforo, and she felt a thrill of delight and called to him. But this time there was no answer inside her soul, and when she reached the part of the wall where he should have been she found no picture, only an empty space. She gave a cry, and went swiftly to and fro along the wall, groping everywhere, but it was no use. He was nowhere to be found; he had been dragged away by evil men; he had gone from her for ever.

When she had made quite certain of the dreadful truth she sank down on the cold stones and began to sob. But her tears only lasted for a few moments; a violent passion of hatred for Aurelio swept over her; she sprang up, determined to confront him, to make him restore the picture to her, to kill him if he refused. She realised everything now: this was why he had found the *forestiere* so amiable, and had wallowed in cuttle-fish and mussels! Her teeth chattered with rage, she shook her fists savagely in the darkness, and shouted broken sentences in a voice husky with passion. Then the paroxysm passed away suddenly, leaving her with a queer sensation of having grown, in an instant, old and wise and very calm. She must act immediately, she knew—but what was the best thing to be done? At first she thought of going to the Bishop, but she soon realised that even if she were allowed to see him, he would probably not believe her story, or would regard the picture as rubbish which Aurelio had a perfect right to sell. It would be better to confront Aurelio at once, to accuse him before every one at the Croce Bianca, and, if necessary, to bite him till he was dead.

Two minutes later she had scaled the Bishop's wall once again, and was walking rapidly across the Piazza del Duomo. It was bitterly cold; the wind blew directly from the snow-covered mountains, and she was barefooted. But she felt warm with the glow of her tremendous purpose; she would rescue San Cristoforo if she had to go alone over the snows to find him.

Half-way across the Piazza she heard a strange and terrible sound, like the noise of many railway accidents combined in one unending roar. She halted, and saw that the single omnibus which the city possessed was labouring towards her over the cobble-stones. Although Maria Assunta was an athlete, she was also an Italian, and would not walk a yard if she had a chance of being carried. The omnibus, she knew, passed close to the Croce Bianca, and the old driver, who was one of her few friends, would always allow her to ride on the step and to open the door for his patrons at the end of the journey. She took up a position under one of the lamps of the Piazza, and when the mouldering vehicle was close to her she waved to the driver, who recognised her and responded with a motion of his whip;

then, as soon as it had passed, she ran after it and sprang on to the step.

At first she thought that there was no one inside the omnibus, but very soon she perceived, by the feeble light of a strong-smelling oil-lamp, that it contained one closely-muffled figure. She stared at the solitary traveller, but could not recognise him; he, for his part, seemed to be unconscious of her presence, and did not turn to look at her. The omnibus bumped and bounded merrily over the stones, and very soon Maria Assunta saw the lights of the Croce Bianca shining on the wind-swept pavement. She was preparing to jump off when an extraordinary sound arose from the interior of the vehicle, —a sound which was audible for a moment above the rattle and roar of the wheels. Maria Assunta's heart began to bound like the omnibus; she had heard that chuckle before. Without a second's hesitation she thrust her head in at the window and shouted with all the strength of her lungs.

“Good evening, signore!” she cried.

Next moment she saw that she had made no mistake with regard to the identity of the owner of the chuckle. The traveller

turned towards her, revealing the huge nose and heavy lips of the mysterious stranger who had invaded the lumber-room. He seemed much startled by her sudden shout, but after staring at her for a moment he grinned. The lights of the Croce Bianca showed him her face.

"Ha, it's the little savage," he said, "the little savage of the Cathedral who sent the sacristan to eject me. And what do you want, little savage?" he went on. "Are you coming with me to Rome, or are you regretting that soldo?"

Maria Assunta gathered her wits together. At any rate, it was something to know that he was going to Rome, though she had no intention of giving him a chance of taking San Cristoforo with him. That the picture was in the omnibus she had not the slightest doubt; in her soul she could hear the voice of the Saint asking her to be kind enough to do him the favour of rescuing him at once, and she almost shouted to him not to be afraid. Instead, however, she managed to answer the fat man.

"I am coming to help the signore to carry his luggage to the train," she said.

"*Molto gentile*," responded the fat man gallantly. "You shall have two soldi, and I will give you a kiss on the platform."

"Thank you, signore," said Maria Assunta, putting out her tongue and making other atrocious grimaces in the darkness. "The stationmaster is my friend, and allows me to help with the luggage when Beppo the porter has his pain in the inside."

"Ha!" said the stranger. He looked at her for a moment and then asked: "Did your excellent father the sacristan send you?"

"Certainly, signore," replied the shameless Maria Assunta. "But he is not my father, for which be thanks to the Holy Virgin and all the Blessed Saints."

"You don't like the gentleman?" inquired the stranger.

"He is a very great fool, signore," replied Maria Assunta with vigour. The stranger laughed heartily.

"He is not such a fool as he looks, signorina," he said. "He can drive a bargain with the best. And talking of the Blessed Saints, my little one, there will be a saint the less in Acquacasciante to-night."

Maria Assunta's heart thumped and

bounded more fiercely than ever, but she controlled her voice. "The signore doubtless refers to his own departure," she said. She felt a real contempt for the fat man's stupidity; any one, she thought, with the least atom of sense would have refrained from revealing his secret in that absurd way. She was unacquainted with the intoxication that the finding of a treasure produces in the soul of the picture-dealer. The fat man, meanwhile, was clapping his horrid hands and chuckling over her answer.

"Very good, very good!" he cried. "You are a young person of wit. I suspected it from the first moment when I met you. Continue, and you shall have four soldi, nothing less."

He asked her various impertinent questions about herself, to which she responded with spirit. She would be amply avenged very soon, she knew, for any amount of insolence from him. Then he looked at his watch nervously, and expressed his fear of missing the night train to Ancona, but she reassured him with the information that the train always waited for Beppo, even when, as frequently happened, the omnibus broke down. At length they reached the station, and

Maria Assunta, after shouting to Beppo that there was no need for him to descend from his crazy perch, flung open the door.

The stranger's luggage consisted of two handbags and a brown paper parcel. Maria Assunta looked eagerly at the parcel, but he retained it, requesting her to carry the bags. They were small but not light, and Maria Assunta made remarks through her clenched teeth as she staggered into the station. The young stationmaster was in the booking-office; he was a genial soul, and the only person in Acquacasciante who took off his hat to her.

“Be quick, signorina,” he cried. “The train has waited for Beppo as usual and the travellers grow impatient.”

“Hurry, signore, or they will leave you behind,” said Maria Assunta to the fat man. The fat man puffed and snorted and began a frenzied search in his pockets, holding the brown paper parcel between his knees. He looked uncommonly foolish, she thought, with his great ugly hands and his gross red face. It would be fun to hit him hard across the eyes, snatch the parcel and rush away with it into the night; but some instinct seemed to restrain her from this

dramatic course; she felt certain that a better opportunity of rescuing San Cristoforo would be afforded her by Heaven.

The stationmaster, after talking to her for a moment, had left the booking-office in the charge of a motherly-looking lady who was slightly deaf. After some altercation, the fat man extracted a ticket from her, and rushed to the platform, followed by Maria Assunta, who was bent double beneath the weight of the bags. His appearance was greeted with an ironical cheer from some of the passengers. The stationmaster informed him that the first-class compartments were in the front of the train; he did not, however, offer to carry one of the bags; stationmasters in Italy are not in the habit of performing that kind of service. He remained at the rear of the train whilst the fat man and Maria Assunta pursued their frenzied course up the platform.

They had nearly reached the first-class coach when the engine-driver blew an impatient blast on his whistle. The fat man charged desperately forward, and Maria Assunta had a dreadful moment of terror; if once he managed to enter the train with his parcel her chance would be gone. She racked

her brain to think of some way of keeping him on the platform, and then, even as he turned and shouted savagely, inspiration came. She glanced round; they were far away from the stationmaster; the first-class carriages were all empty. She uttered a loud groan and dropped the bags.

“Signore,” she wailed, “pardon me, but they are too heavy; I cannot carry them another inch.” She sat down on one of the bags abruptly. The fat man snarled.

“Little animal!” he cried. “You will make me lose the train; you will cost me a million lire!” He ran back to her and seized one of the bags. “Pig of a girl,” he said, “bring the other one instantly!”

Maria Assunta pretended to make an effort to lift the remaining bag, and then let it drop.

“Pardon, signore,” she said calmly; “it is impossible. Something has broken in my poor back.”

“May the devil carry it away!” said the fat man; alluding, it is to be presumed, to Maria Assunta’s dorsal region and not to his luggage. “Quick, take this!” he cried furiously, thrusting the parcel into her arms. He seized the two bags and ran like a mad

bull towards the train. He had just reached the door of one of the first-class compartments when Maria Assunta lifted up her voice.

“*Pronto!*” she shouted, with all the force of her lungs. There was an answering shout from the other end of the station; a horn blew, the whistle sounded again, and the train gave a jerk forward. The fat man, who had been obliged to drop one of the bags while he opened the door, had managed to scramble with the other up the steep steps, and fell heavily into the carriage. But he was on his feet again in a moment, and rushed to the door.

“The rest of the luggage!” he shouted to Maria Assunta.

“Sissignore!” replied that astute young woman, laying the brown paper parcel on the platform and running to the bag which he had dropped. She hoisted it slowly and painfully from step to step. The fat man grabbed it savagely and hauled it into the carriage. “The other, little fool!” he yelled.

Next moment the train began to move in good earnest. The fat man danced up and down in the carriage like a demon imprisoned

in a bottle. "The other, the other!" he repeated furiously. Maria Assunta walked slowly back to the parcel and picked it up. Then she began to run by the side of the train. The fat man slammed the door and leant out of the window with both his arms extended towards the parcel. Maria Assunta looked up at him.

"You are mistaken, signore," she said. "This does not belong to you." Then she smiled brilliantly and, ceasing to run, waved him farewell with her free hand. The fat man stared at her for an instant; his face worked convulsively, his arms moved like the arms of a marionette.

"Little devil!" he cried, and half opened the carriage door. For one awful moment Maria Assunta thought that he would jump out, but by this time the train was moving rapidly and the fat man was neither athletic nor brave. He shut the door again, and leant far out of the window.

"Stop, stop!" he shouted. But there was no one to hear him except Maria Assunta, for the stationmaster had departed to the stove in the booking - office. In another moment his distorted countenance had vanished from her sight.

"We did that very well," said Maria Assunta calmly to the brown paper parcel.

She went straight to the stationmaster and informed him that the stranger had left a parcel behind which her Uncle Aurelio had given to him. The stationmaster agreed with her at once that the parcel ought to be returned to Aurelio, who, it was presumed, would know the address of the stranger. He informed her that there was no train from Ancona to Acquacasciante until the following morning, that she had the most delightful eyes he had ever seen, and that he was very soon coming to take her away from her beloved uncle for ever. Maria Assunta told him that he was a ridiculous old man (he was very nearly thirty), but she kissed her hand to him as she departed from the station.

She ran home as fast as possible, and, to her great joy, found when she arrived that her uncle and aunt were still revelling at the Croce Bianca. She whirled the parcel up to the dismal attic where she slept and tore off the paper cover. Her inner sense had not played her false: it was really San Cristoforo whom she had rescued. Her joy at seeing him again was indescribable, and

there is no doubt that the face of the Saint wore a distinct expression of pleasure, though he still had the air of looking firmly yet warily ahead. When questioned, he deposed that it had been abominably hot inside the parcel, and he applied a great number of opprobrious terms to the stranger. The only sympathetic personage whom he had met in the course of his travels was the station-master, whom he thought an excellent fellow. It was perhaps a pity, he opined, that Maria Assunta had not been able to rescue him without being recognised by the stranger, and he agreed with her that the best course would be to obtain an interview with the Bishop early the next morning and to tell him the whole story. It would be awkward for Aurelio, but that could not be helped.

Further discussion of the state of affairs was rendered impossible by the return of her uncle and aunt. They made a terrible scene when they saw that all the plates and dishes were still unwashed, but Maria Assunta, with San Cristoforo safe and snug beneath the mattress of her bed, would have cheerfully faced a horde of ravening tigers. She actually sang as she cleared away the remains of the feast, and laughed when she tried to

imagine the sensations of the stranger during his cold journey to Ancona. She went to rest at last with a blissful sensation that one day in her life, at any rate, had been conspicuously successful.

She woke early next morning, and almost believed, until she put her hand under the mattress, that she had dreamt all the events of the previous night. Then she hauled out the picture, and with an agreeable lack of decorum talked to San Cristoforo while she put on her scanty clothes. In order to do honour to the Bishop she added the skeletons of an old pair of stockings to her usual toilette, and twisted her hair into a tight coil on the top of her head. She felt extremely happy; the autumn sunshine poured in at the window, the air was warm and fresh, and San Cristoforo regarded her with a smile of sincere affection. For a moment the thought of parting from him depressed her, but she was firmly convinced that it was impossible for him to remain in the house. The foreigner was certain to return, and, after all, the Bishop was a good man and would doubtless allow them to meet very often. She made San Cristoforo promise

that if the Bishop proved, as even bishops will, to be a bore, he would tell her and she would rescue him again.

She found his powers of conversation so entralling that she continued to talk to him for some time after she had dressed, telling herself that there was no fear for the present of the foreigner's return. Thus, the very frailties of our human nature are employed by the saints as a starting-point for their glorious achievements; for if Maria Assunta had not self-indulgently communed with San Cristoforo when she ought to have been taking him to the Vescovado, she would never have been captured by the foreigner, a great miracle would have remained unwrought, and Aurelio would never have reformed and ceased to drink new or old wine.

Eight o'clock had sounded from the campanile of the Cathedral before she decided to start. Uncle Aurelio and Aunt Giannina, who slept in the room below, still snored loudly; but the Bishop, she knew, would be awake, and probably, as it was a fine morning, would be reading his breviary in the garden. She wrapped up the picture in the sheets of brown paper and flung an old shawl over the parcel; then she crept downstairs

on tiptoe and noiselessly opened the front door. She peered out for a moment, closed the door, passed swiftly down the street, turned down a narrow alley, and, as she emerged in the Piazza del Duomo, ran straight into the arms of the fat man.

She uttered a loud cry and he gave a shout; she tried to push him away and to escape down the alley, but he caught hold of the coil of her hair with one hand and her wrist with the other. There was no one in the Piazza to observe this singular meeting except one small and dirty boy, who watched it with tranquil interest. Maria Assunta wriggled like an eel, the fat man puffed and blew, but he retained his hold on her, and squeezed her wrist until she thought it would break.

“Little devil!” said the fat man. “Offspring of a thousand hogs!” said Maria Assunta. She placed her foot against his stomach and pushed very hard. The small boy almost applauded this method of resistance, but it was fruitless. The fat man shifted his grip from her hair to her neck, swung her round so that her back was turned towards him, and began to propel her rapidly down the alley.

"We will now pay a morning call on your venerable uncle," he said, panting, but with dignity. "He, unless I am mistaken, has devoted a good deal of care to your education. I propose to stamp on his face, your face, and the face of his wife, and then I will go away with my picture." And he squeezed her neck until she gasped with pain. Next moment, however, she perceived the aged mother of Guglielmo, the greengrocer, who was in the act of taking down his shutters. Maria Assunta howled to her for help.

"This gentleman is assassinating me," she exclaimed.

The aged mother of the greengrocer turned, set her arms akimbo, and stared apathetically at Maria Assunta and the fat man.

"What has the little good-for-nothing done now, signore?" she inquired.

"She has merely stolen an object of art worth fifty thousand lire, dear lady," replied the fat man, continuing to propel Maria Assunta.

"Ah! Then she will be hanged like a cat," said the mother of the greengrocer with great satisfaction, displaying an ignorance of the penal laws of her country which the fat man did not trouble to enlighten. She

continued to take down her shutters, whilst Maria Assunta and her enemy danced a *pas-deux* in syncopated time until they reached Aurelio's house. Without releasing her, the fat man kicked furiously on the door, and after a few moments the head of Aurelio, in a blue cotton nightcap, appeared at the window. When he saw the strange scene below he uttered a shout of surprise.

"Mother of the Saints, signore," he cried, "what has happened?"

The fat man regarded him with a frightful grin.

"I will tell you that later," he answered pleasantly. "What is going to happen is, briefly, this: I am about to pound your head and the heads of your nearest relations into a sanguinary paste. Kindly descend and open the door."

Aurelio was evidently impressed by this statement of the stranger's intentions. He thrust his nightcap upwards and scratched his head slowly.

"But, most excellent signore——" he began.

"Open the door, old filthiness, or I break it in," said the stranger. Aurelio shut the window hurriedly and retired to confer with

Aunt Giannina, whose scared face had appeared for a moment behind his shoulder. After a brief delay the door opened slowly, and the stranger and Maria Assunta hurtled into the kitchen. Aurelio, blinking with amazement, followed them, whilst Aunt Giannina occupied a strategical position at the head of the stairs.

The first act of the fat man was to snatch the parcel from Maria Assunta's hands and to tear off the brown paper. As soon as he had uncovered the picture he examined it carefully, and then placed it on the high chimneypiece, where it was out of Maria Assunta's reach.

"Now explain," he said to Aurelio, "why you were such an old fool as to send your accomplice to steal the picture from me. You knew that I had seen her, that I should recognise her and come back by the first train."

Aurelio looked hopelessly bewildered. "I don't understand," he said. "The *ragazza*—may the devil annoy her!—the *ragazza* knew nothing of the picture. Without doubt she was merely stealing a parcel from you on general principles, signore."

Maria Assunta spoke out, in spite of the

pain in her throat. "I took the picture because it was mine," she said. "I knew that he had it inside the brown paper. He had no right to take away my friend, and you had no right to sell it. And," she concluded, "I shall tell the whole story to the Bishop, and the big policeman, and the stationmaster, and to every one. They will believe me; they will lock you all up in the prison, and I shall come twice a-day to make faces at you through the window, and to tell you how much I regret having thieves and dirty persons for my relations."

Aurelio glared at her with intense fury, and shook his fist at her. "Wait a moment, my dear child," he murmured. Then he turned to the stranger.

"You hear, signore?" he said. "She stole it herself; I had nothing to do with the affair, and my personal honour is greatly wounded by the affront that has been offered. However, let that pass; the affair has terminated fortunately, and nothing remains but for you to take away the picture as soon as possible."

Maria Assunta drew herself up like a serpent about to strike. "He shall not

take it!" she shouted. "If he does, he shall kill me first."

The stranger looked hard at her. "That is not a bad suggestion," he said slowly. "As a matter of fact, it would be better if she were dead; that accursed tongue of hers will wag."

Uncle Aurelio nodded wisely. "But it would wag in vain," he said, "if she were strapped to a chair for two or three days. At the end of that time, signore, you would be far away and I should have hung another picture in place of the one that has gone. No one would believe her story. All my friends are aware that she has proved herself on every occasion to be a most abandoned little liar."

"She is liar, thief, cat, snake, and scorpion, and she makes the soft eyes at the station-master," said Aunt Giannina, who had descended in a yellow dressing-gown to the kitchen. "But have no fear, signore; we will tie her up like the mad beast that she is and I will watch her continually."

Maria Assunta glanced from one to another of the three evil faces, and then she decided that her only hope of saving San Cristoforo lay in her finding the Bishop before the

stranger had time to take another train. She made a desperate rush for the door, but her enemies were too quick for her; the stranger caught her arm, and Aunt Giannina began to pummel her unmercifully. She broke away from them only to find herself confronted by Uncle Aurelio, who had armed himself with a thick stick. He struck at her with all his might, nearly knocking all the breath out of her body, but she managed to run in and seize one of his legs. Uncle Aurelio, shouting curses, began to totter.

"The head! aim at the head!" shrieked Aunt Giannina, trying to pull her away. Aurelio kicked himself free and raised the stick in both his hands.

"If I kill her it is her fault," he said solemnly. "You are witnesses of that."

He gave the stick a preliminary whirl in the air.

There are three distinct accounts of the event which happened during the following moments,—that of Maria Assunta, that of Aurelio, and that of Giannina. Of these, the present historian prefers to follow Maria Assunta's, though Giannina's story is very slightly dissimilar, the latter lady having

been scared into speaking some part of the truth for once in her life. Aurelio's statement differs entirely from that of the other two witnesses, and never obtained any credit. The fat man did not remain to testify.

According to Maria Assunta, the heavy stick was in the very act of descending on her head, when there was a strange rushing sound in the air, a brilliant light shone in the room, and an enormous old man with a white beard and very large bare legs appeared suddenly at her side, broke Aurelio's stick into half a dozen fragments with one blow from a huge staff, and smote that too zealous guardian of infancy such a hearty thwack on his hinder parts that Aurelio, with a poignant yell, leapt the entire breadth of the room and knocked over the stranger like a nine-pin. The old man then proceeded to administer a thrashing of the most finished description to Aurelio and the fat man, who writhed and rolled on the floor, and howled for quarter at the pitch of their voices. At first they assumed the most fantastic shapes in their efforts to escape the terrible flail that rained blows upon them; but after a very short time they ceased to move, and lay like dying pigs, groaning piteously. The old man ad-

ministered a few more artistic blows to their prostrate bodies, and then he went over to Aunt Giannina, who fell on her knees and wailed for mercy.

San Cristoforo—for of course Maria Assunta had recognised him at once—was too perfect a gentleman to strike even Aunt Giannina. He contented himself merely with looking at her. Exactly what kind of expression he wore Maria Assunta could never explain; his halo suddenly became very bright, and dazzled her eyes. The effect on Aunt Giannina, however, was remarkable; she cowered on the floor, cried out that she was a wicked sinner, and begged him to strike her dead rather than to regard her again with those terrible eyes. Afterwards Aunt Giannina denied that she had called herself wicked, but there is no doubt of her having become an altered woman from that moment. Having accomplished this excellent work, San Cristoforo smiled at Maria Assunta, pointed to the door, and gradually vanished,—returning, she supposed, into the picture. At any rate he was there, wading as usual in the river, a moment afterwards.

For some time Maria Assunta was too bewildered to move a limb, but stood staring

like a person in a trance at the spot from which the saint had vanished. Then a new chorus of groans from the vanquished aroused her; she seized a chair, and placing it under the chimneypiece, climbed on it and took down the picture. Next moment she was out of the house and running to the Vescovado: simultaneously Aunt Giannina sprang suddenly from the floor and bounded into the street, yellow dressing-gown and all. Outside, she began to rush up and down like one pursued by an army of hornets.

“Miracolo, miracolo! un santo, un gran santo!” she screamed. Though a cruel woman, she had always been extremely pious, and the affair had no doubt a great effect on her superstitious temperament. A crowd collected instantly, and Giannina, with much gasping and gurgling, began to give her version of all that had happened. Her excitement was so intense that she did not attempt to screen Aurelio; perhaps this fact, as well as her extremely disordered state, impressed the crowd; at any rate, a number of the people began to take up her cry, and very soon she was staggering at the head of an enthusiastic procession towards the Vescovado, where Maria Assunta was

already enjoying an audience with the Bishop.

That good man had received the girl in his garden. He listened to her tale in silence, looking absently at the picture which she had thrust into his hands. When she had told him everything he stared at her very keenly for some time with his shrewd, black old eyes, and then turned to his chaplain, a handsome young priest in a very smart soutane, who was standing behind him.

“What do you think of this, Gioacchino?” he demanded.

The chaplain shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “She does not look like a liar,” he said, after contemplating Maria Assunta; “all little girls who tell lies turn in their toes. But perhaps another witness would be desirable.”

“But, Monsignore, there are three others!” cried Maria Assunta, and then she paused. She knew too well that Aurelio, as soon as he recovered from his fright, would concoct some amazing story which would certainly not corroborate her own, and she was not, of course, aware of the spiritual change which had come to pass in the soul of Aunt Giannina. The stranger, too, would prob-

ably support Aurelio. After a moment of thought she looked appealingly at the Bishop.

"If Monsignore would only come now," she said, "and see the bruises that the holy saint condescended to imprint on their bodies, I think that he would believe me."

The Bishop smiled. "That is not a bad idea," he said. "The spectacle should be interesting; and as I have known for some time that our dear Aurelio is a conspicuous rogue, this will be a most suitable occasion for giving him some ghostly advice. You shall show us the way, little one."

"With pleasure, Monsignore," said Maria Assunta, "if Monsignore will forgive the appearance of my stockings."

"My child, the eye of the Church is blind to that kind of apparel," replied Gioacchino very solemnly.

"*Sicuro, sicuro!*" added the Bishop, but he gave a little choking laugh which was like a puppy's bark, thought Maria Assunta. Then they locked up the picture in the Vescovado and set out for Aurelio's house: the Bishop, who walked very fast, was in the middle, with tall Father Gioacchino on one side of him and Maria Assunta on the

other. She thought that it would be more decorous for her to run on in front of these holy men, but the Bishop pretended to want to talk to her, and Gioacchino said that when people walked in front of him it made him feel like a poor relation.

They had only gone a short distance when they met Giannina at the head of her procession. Giannina, as soon as she saw them, uttered an ecstatic howl, and rushing towards Maria Assunta, enfolded her in a violent embrace; the crowd, cheering noisily, surrounded them. Then Giannina flung herself at the feet of the Bishop, who was staring with amazed eyes at the yellow dressing-gown.

“Behold her, Monsignore!” she cried. “Behold the little friend of the Blessed Saints, who become visible in this very place in order to protect her from wicked persons of the other sex! I saw him myself, Monsignore, with these eyes: he was enormous, enormous as the Duomo tower, and his face was like the red sun coming through a mist.” Her voice rose to a shrill shriek, and she fell flat on the ground, writhing. Gioacchino picked her up, and gave her into the custody of some women who were standing at the door of their house.

“This becomes interesting,” said the Bishop. “Let us hear what those wicked persons of the other sex have to say for themselves. My dears,” he added, turning to the crowd, “your rejoicings betray an excellent spirit, but let us beware of premature enthusiasm.”

“Yes, yes, Monsignore!” shouted the crowd.

Probably none of its members had the faintest idea what he meant. It followed him at a respectful distance to Aurelio’s house, where it grouped itself round the door and cheered until it was hoarse. Aurelio did not appear at the window to acknowledge the cheering, and when the Bishop and his two companions had entered the kitchen they found him and the fat man propped up against the wall in the attitude of persons in the stocks. Aurelio’s groans, when he recognised his visitors, became terrible.

The Bishop spoke to him sternly. “Aurelio,” he said, “cease to utter those unmusical and disturbing sounds, collect your few wits, and tell us exactly what has happened.”

Aurelio rolled his eyes dreadfully. “Monsignore,” he said, “on my word of honour as a gentleman and a member of the oldest family in the *contrado*, this is what befell. A great

demon with fiery eyes and flaming hair was brought here by the art of that girl who dares to stand near your sacred presence, and is, as all the world knows, a witch in league with the devil. Because I refused to allow her to steal a holy picture from the Duomo—which is sacrilege, as your Eminence knows—she bade the demon beat me until I was dead; and this he would certainly have done if I had not at the last moment contrived to exorcise him by saying two Paters and twenty Aves. Accept the word of one who is probably a dying man, Monsignore; that is the simple truth."

The Bishop looked at him with a severe countenance, and then turned to the fat man, who had risen slowly and painfully.

"Is that your version of the story, signore?" he asked.

But the fat man was in a state of mental collapse. "I don't know what happened," he said. "I'm a materialist. I don't believe in saints and ghosts and all your hocus-pocus; but if ever I come to this accursed place again you may dress me up in a yellow shirt and shave my head and lock me in an asylum for mad monks. My earnest

wish," he concluded, "is that the devil may take you all, and especially that young lady and this old sink of all iniquity."

Having uttered these pious sentiments he limped out of the house, and a moment later they heard him making shocking remarks to the crowd outside. He never returned to Acquacasciante.

Now concerning the sequel to the miracle—how the Bishop improved the occasion with Aurelio, how Giannina became a monster of piety, and how the fame of the picture from which, it was believed, San Cristoforo had actually emerged, spread far and wide over the district, and resulted in the great annual pilgrimage—you will have a full account when you go to Acquacasciante and talk to the stationmaster. My task of giving you an impartial history of the event may well end, as all good histories should, with the discomfiture of the wicked and the justification of the worthy. I may add, however, that Maria Assunta and San Cristoforo remained firm friends; and if he did not again appear visibly on earth as her cham-

pion, it was merely because there was no need for him to do so, for the good Bishop removed her from the tutelage of Aunt Giannina, and finding that she was greatly harassed by the attentions of the faithful, who were always following her about in the hope that the Saint would suddenly appear, he sent her to an excellent school in Rome, where she passed five happy years, and grew into a beautiful young woman. Then she returned to Acquacasciante and married the stationmaster, and put up a tombstone to Uncle Aurelio and Aunt Giannina, who had ended their venerable lives in the holiest possible manner. She is extremely famous throughout the district, and is regarded as a kind of saint, though she shocked a great number of foolish persons by refusing to adopt an actively religious career, preferring to live quietly and happily with her stationmaster and her babies. Such an existence, after all, is probably the one which San Cristoforo, who is, as we have seen, a thoroughly sensible and practical person, would himself have chosen for her. San Cristoforo, by the way, often complains to her that he feels idle. There has certainly

never been any occasion for him to beat the stationmaster. His picture occupies an honourable position in the Cathedral, and he will doubtless be much interested in learning the name of the artist to whom you assign it.

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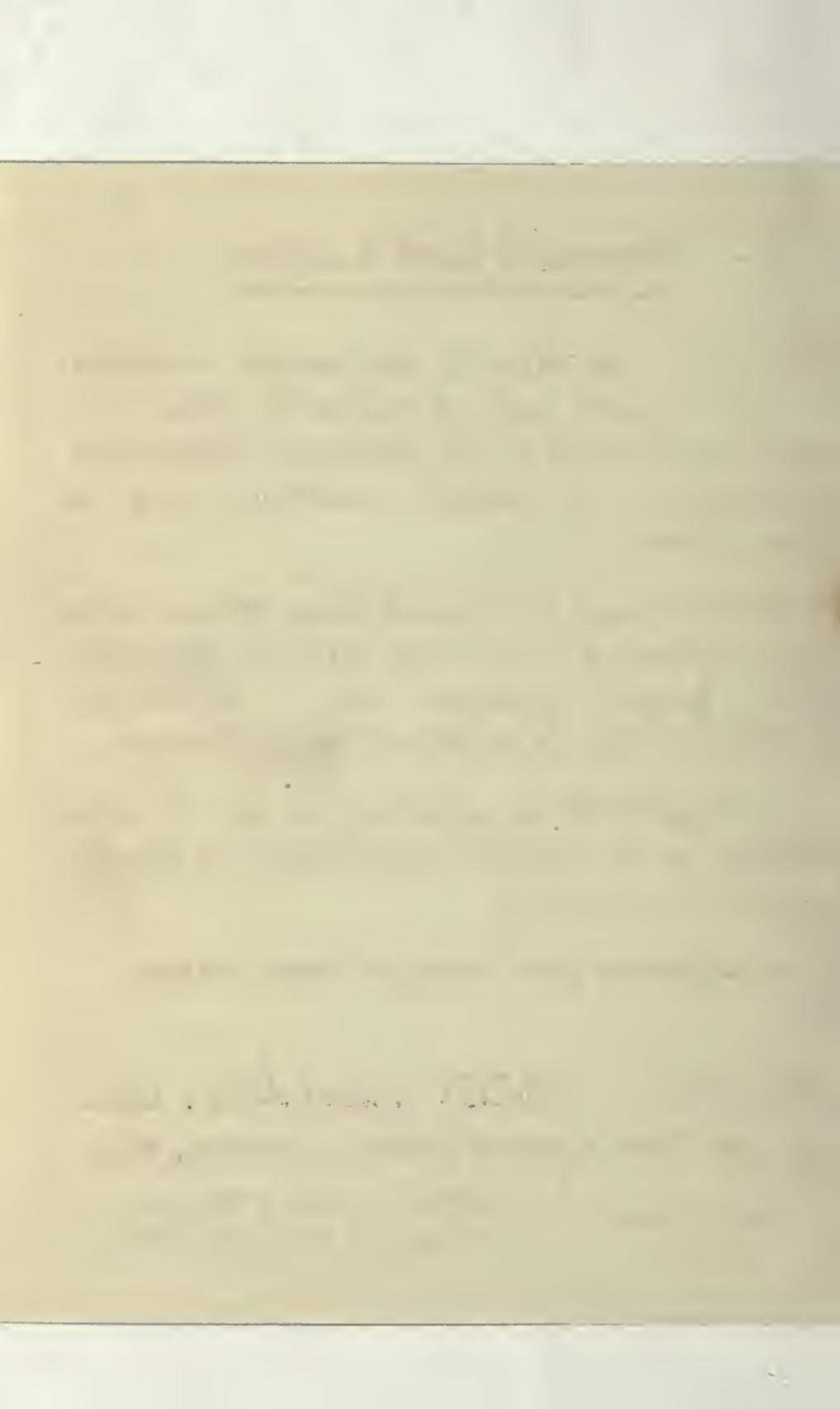
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